

A Winning Recipe for Volunteerism

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***** Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Abstract:

A program in North Carolina takes college students, mixes in individuals with disabilities and adds park staff support to create a winning combination.

Article:

How many hours did your staff spend spreading mulch or pine needles? Does your agency need to clear a new trail, but lack the staff time to get it accomplished? Are citizens asking to volunteer in your park, but you lack the resources to effectively manage them on projects? Are you being asked to expand the successful programs that you currently offer? Has it also been suggested that you serve a more diverse population? Why not begin to address all of these issues at once.

The Greensboro (NC) Parks and Recreation department found a way to do just that. Instead of managing individual volunteers, the agency designed programs where volunteering was the targeted recreational activity. The recreational needs of individuals with and without disabilities are being met, while agencies are reaping the benefits of hundreds of volunteer hours through this inclusive park program.

The traditional model of engaging volunteers focuses exclusively on meeting the needs of the agency. By matching individual volunteers with needed tasks within the agency, short-term outcomes for the facility are realized. However, if volunteers' needs are not also met, they are likely to become short-term visitors. In addition, managing volunteers who support your park can be a time-consuming endeavor. Think about structuring a recreation program where volunteering is the essence of the experience. Through this unique and active recreational pursuit, participants are likely to see increases in skill development, self-esteem, social networking, sense of community and empowerment. Extraordinary outcomes result when a group of volunteers become part of a team of individuals working toward a common goal. A sense of camaraderie and belonging develops as individuals work side-by-side with other altruistic citizens.

Add an additional layer to this "volunteering as recreation" strategy. Actively invite individuals with disabilities to join your volunteer program; that is people who have rarely, if ever, been asked to give back to their communities. Despite comprising approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population, researchers suggest that individuals with disabilities make up only about 5 percent of our nation's volunteer pool. An inclusive volunteer program brings individuals with disabilities into the volunteer service arena and a "win-win-win" situation begins to evolve.

What is inclusive volunteering?

Volunteering empowers people with disabilities to serve others, rather than being the recipients of volunteer services. Inclusive volunteering brings individuals with and without disabilities together to improve their communities by placing them in positions to be recognized as community assets with many gifts and talents to share. It is beneficial to volunteers and nonprofit agencies alike. Volunteers

with and without disabilities are rewarded with feelings of empowerment and increased community participation. Organizations served by these volunteers also typically notice a transformation in its



staff's view of people of varying abilities. Agency staff becomes focused on the abilities of volunteers rather than their limitations, concurrently noting improvements in their agencies' services.

Preparing and Implementing the Inclusive Volunteer Program

The Department of Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality Management of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) collaborated with the Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department to establish an inclusive volunteer program. This program brought together high school students with developmental disabilities and students without disabilities from UNCG. For the past five years, students with and without disabilities have been meeting together weekly for two hours to volunteer in various parks during 10-week periods. The volunteers completed meaningful projects including trail building, mulching, picking up litter, weeding and building birdhouses, bridges, gates and signs.

The high school students had community service hours to fulfill in order to graduate. The teachers selected eight to 10 students to participate during each session, ranging in age from 14 to 22, with a range of developmental disabilities. Buses were arranged and paid for by the school since the volunteer program met student curriculum requirements. Ten to 15 UNCG students were then recruited at the beginning of each semester from university undergraduate classes that require volunteer hours. These students ranged in age from 18 to 25 years.

For each group, a facilitator was present—he or she was usually a graduate assistant studying in Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality Management. This person was responsible for contacting the high school teachers and park staff at the beginning of each session to schedule program dates and times; recruiting UNCG volunteers; identifying and implementing team-building activities to develop trust, teamwork and group problem solving; and implementing techniques to ensure the inclusive nature of the program. The emphasis for all activities was on cooperation, teamwork and matching the interests and abilities of the students to the volunteer activities.

In order to foster cooperation and an inclusive environment, the facilitator also was responsible for implementing small-group activities that foster team-work, trust and group problem-solving. Similar to the volunteer projects themselves, the facilitator ensured that the team-building activities were carefully designed with special accommodations considered.

For example, if an activity involved reading and writing, the facilitator paired the volunteers so that at least one individual in the group could read and write. Noting that the volunteers had different learning styles, the facilitator offered specific instructions while also demonstrating how the tasks should be accomplished.

Following team-building activities, the park manager described the volunteer tasks for the day. Partners or small groups were formulated depending on the nature of the tasks and interests of the participants. Certain tasks, such as building a bridge, proved to be more popular than others, such as picking up trash throughout the park. In this instance, a rotation system was arranged so that everybody had the opportunity to work on each task. At times, the facilitator needed to intervene to reinforce active participation, social inclusion over productivity, and offered techniques to help volunteers work cooperatively.

Though it sounds like a typical volunteer program, there were some unique alterations made to allow everyone to participate. During the planning process, volunteer tasks were broken down into distinct steps. This allowed planners to identify the various roles that volunteers could fill in the completion of a single task. Instead of expecting one volunteer to complete an entire task, volunteers were instead asked to work with others to complete several components of the task. Therefore, volunteers would have to work cooperatively in order for the group to be successful.

A mulching project, for example, could be divided into four primary steps. A group of volunteers shoveled mulch into wheelbarrows. Another group pushed wheelbarrows to the appropriate location to dump the mulch.

A third group spread the mulch with rakes. A final group transported water to each of the groups. This planning technique also allowed volunteers to decide in which aspect of the task they would be involved. The element of choice enabled volunteers to work on a component of a larger activity that carefully matched their interests and abilities.

Park staff was responsible for identifying all volunteer tasks, and thus were forced to take inventory of the park's problems. Since several parks did not design consistent or ongoing projects, the volunteers were able to work at many different area parks and with various park staff throughout the city. Park staff were also responsible for organizing the tools and materials necessary to complete the tasks and provided supervision during the program.

The staff was encouraged to prepare one large project or various small projects for the volunteers. Having additional projects ready when volunteers completed their work earlier than expected was a helpful strategy. Park staff was also encouraged to have sufficient tools available for the group. Presenting one tool for every two volunteers was usually sufficient and helped to foster cooperative programming and social inclusion.

The program also made agency managers take another look at their facilities. Since several of the volunteers were in wheelchairs or had limited mobility, the facilitator ensured that projects were conducted in areas that were physically accessible. This allowed park managers to further consider the accessibility of their parks and plan for future volunteer and recreational activities.

As with any programmed activity, there were unexpected surprises. Occasionally, the high school buses ran late, park staff did not have sufficient activities planned, or the weather was too cold and rainy to work outdoors. The facilitator was prepared to adjust the activities as necessary. Multiple weeks of rainy weather led to working at an indoor park shop facility where the volunteers built birdhouses, gates and park signs. Preparing for inclement weather well in advance, as well as remaining flexible, helped ensure that the groups volunteered successfully throughout the sessions.

When volunteer tasks were completed, the facilitator asked volunteers to describe what they accomplished and to assess how they felt about the activities. Time to reflect on accomplishments as a group was critical since volunteers were not always sure how their successes fit into the accomplishments of the larger group. Debriefing was a way to celebrate individual and group accomplishments, social inclusion out-comes and offered opportunities to learn from their peers. Through a focus group held with the students without disabilities, informal conversations with the teachers and park staff and letters written by the students with disabilities, it was determined that the program was a success for the volunteers and the parks.

Volunteers without disabilities

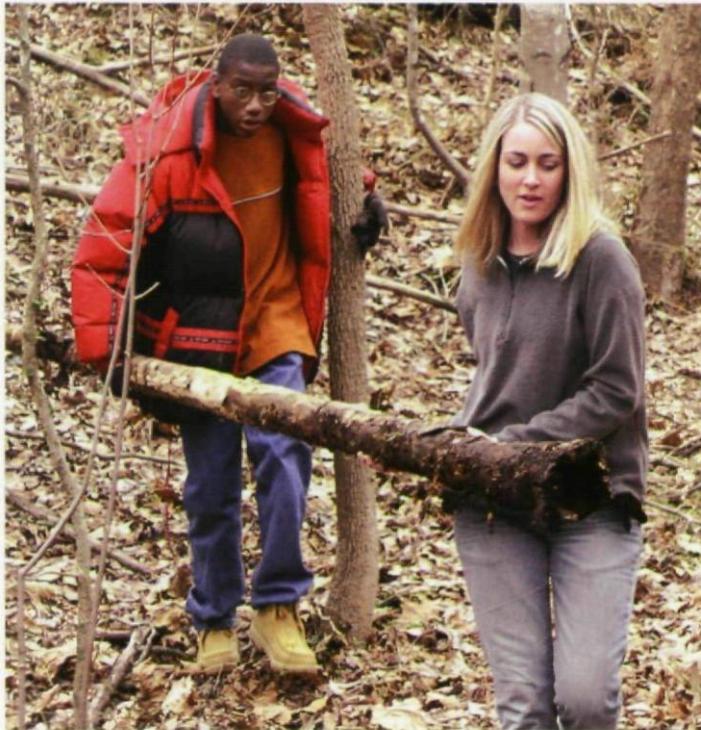
Many of the university students had little, if any, contact with individuals with disabilities prior to the program. They were understandably nervous about their first inclusive experiences. As one student states,

"I remember that first day at the high school. It felt like a junior high dance. We were all over here and all the students (with disabilities) were over there. But, I feel once you get into the activities, you just act like normal. And I think that's all it took for me is just to act like myself and it just went on from there."

The students increased their confidence in interacting with their peers with disabilities, became more aware of disability-related issues and developed strategies to successfully include others in the activities. They reported having few qualms about being around individuals with disabilities in their future personal and professional lives. One student noted, "I know I'll take the information I gained from this experience and use it as a teacher, and hopefully, my students can look at me and see how I deal with individuals and learn from my actions."

They also developed meaningful relationships with their peers with disabilities. They spoke of wanting to volunteer more than once a week and visit their peer partners in their classrooms after

(opposite page)
Professionals and
volunteers part-
nered to create
the Veteran's Trail
of Peace. (right)
Students worked
with individuals
with disabilities
to clear the trail.



the program ended. One student comments,

"I enjoyed it. I really, really enjoyed it. I just wish I could have worked with the students more... But, John (pseudonym) came up to me at the end, and it was the last week, and he knew he wasn't going to get to see me again. He said he was going to have his Mom write down his phone number so he and I could go play golf. That meant a lot to me."

Volunteers with disabilities

Class-room teachers observed increases in their students' social skills, abilities to problem solve, follow directions and work with others. One teacher says,

"These group activities improved my students' social interaction abilities. They also helped with problem solving techniques—asking/talking with others to come to a common goal. I saw growth in these areas with all of y students."

Volunteers with disabilities were less concerned with skills learned and the benefits they received, and more interested in discussing other facets of the program. One student wrote, "I liked the trees, birds, building, games, out-doors, fishing." Through the program, they were able to experience many new activities, environments and people. Another student notes, "I like going to the park and building stuff and talking to new people and working together with the UNCG students."

Agency

A Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department park manager states that the benefits were numerous for his staff and the park itself, and that the citizens of Greensboro greatly benefited from the improvements in the park. Park staff had undergone profound personal and professional changes. They now anticipate the needs of patrons with varying abilities, and they are better able to recognize the preparatory needs for special events and daily accessibility to the park.

Something as simple as keeping the paved areas clean of debris now carries more importance, since persons using wheelchairs have increased in numbers at the park. Those simple considerations, as well as the exposure to, and involvement with persons of varying abilities, has helped park staff reconsider the design of several features within the park, as well as new construction of trails and facilities. With students, individuals with disabilities and park staff benefiting, it seems an inclusive volunteering experience should be available at every park. Are you ready to witness the extraordinary outcomes that result when individuals with and without disabilities volunteer together? It's a winning strategy for everyone.

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