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Building Better Library Volunteer Programs

Abstract

Volunteerism in public libraries is impeded by a culture of *volunteer management*, wherein outcome is framed in terms of the completion of prescribed clerical tasks, and output is measured purely in terms of hours served. For volunteers, this scenario can present limited options; for library staff, trying to find things for volunteers to do can feel like an encumbrance. Spearheading a cultural shift away from transactional library volunteerism toward transformational volunteering is the California State Library's state-wide initiative, 'Get Involved: powered by your library'. At its core, this project is driven by *volunteer engagement*: an emerging theoretical and practical model of approaching, perceiving and working with volunteers. At a strategic level, volunteer engagement is fuelled by high-impact, skills-based volunteer opportunities in a project delivery context.

In this paper, I demonstrate how the Get Involved program has successfully implemented the key focus areas of the Australian Government's *National Volunteering Strategy* (2011) to better meet the needs of today's volunteers and library staff, align with contemporary library practice, and bring enhanced and expanded library services to the community. The research informing this paper was undertaken during an internship at California State Library in November 2014, and

site visits to leading Californian libraries in volunteer engagement programming. It was wholly funded by the Library Board of Victoria's Barrett Reid Scholarship, 2013. The key deliverable of this scholarship project is a website for sharing best practice in library volunteer programming and engagement, to be launched at the 2016 Australian Library and Information Alliance Conference, *Engage, Create, Lead*.

Introduction

Generally speaking, Australian library volunteer programs are governed by a model of recruiting, managing and retaining volunteer service that values output in terms of the number of volunteer hours served. Most library services feel compelled to take on anyone who is willing to offer their services free of charge, resulting in a situation wherein nearly anyone who applies to volunteer at their local library is accepted. More often than not, public library volunteers are given a list of specific tasks with prescribed outcomes – for example, shelving, tidying, and pulling items off the shelves for weeding, reservations or stock rotation. For volunteers, this scenario can present limited options. For library staff, it can amount to pressure “to create work to keep volunteers busy.” (Young, 2012)

An exciting development in the landscape of library volunteerism is underway in Californian public libraries thanks to the California State Library's state-wide initiative, 'Get Involved: Powered by Your Library.' At its core, this project is driven by an emerging theoretical and practical model of approaching, perceiving and working with volunteers, known as *volunteer engagement*. Volunteer engagement aligns with the principles and outcomes of what is broadly defined as 'civic

engagement' or 'community engagement' – the ultimate aim of which is 'capacity building' or active participation and community collaboration in the achievement of 'social capital.' In November 2014, I spent a month participating in an internship with Carla Lehn – the brains behind the Get Involved program, and now retired Library Programs Consultant, California State Library, Sacramento. My internship included site visits to Sacramento Public Libraries, San Jose Public Libraries, and Huntington Beach Public Libraries, all of which are leaders in the field of volunteer engagement programming. I was also fortunate to attend volunteer engagement workshops at the California Library Association Conference 2014, 'Be the Change,' which was held in Oakland.

The policy context informing Australia's volunteering sector is framed by the Federal Government's *National Volunteering Strategy* (2011). Developed in consultation with the volunteering community and peak bodies, it sets out a vision for the future of volunteerism in Australia. The strategy prioritises six focus areas for action. This paper showcases how the California State Library's Get Involved program has successfully implemented these key areas for action in public library volunteer engagement programming, through

- an explicit understanding of emerging trends in volunteering and the motivation that inspires people to volunteer in divergent ways;
- an innovative approach to designing volunteer roles;
- harnessing technology to promote and support volunteerism in libraries;
- overt recognition of the value of volunteerism to the library sector;

- providing management tools and training materials to enable and support library staff to better engage with volunteers, share best practice and minimise risk.

Ultimately, it is a model for working together to engage the community in library services and programs that is eminently accessible and replicable for Australian public libraries.

Background

Now in its 5th year, Get Involved aims to better meet the needs of today's volunteers, and align volunteer programs with the needs of the library in order to bring enhanced and expanded library services to the community. The story of Get Involved is essentially how one woman successfully wrangled 183 library services around the state who manage more than 1100 buildings and serve 38 million Californians to come together and embrace the concept of skilled volunteerism, and in the process, bring big changes to their practices. The program has been so successful in transforming libraries' approaches to volunteer programming and community partnerships that it has recently extended its reach to public libraries in Ohio and Texas.

Fundamentally, Get Involved is not about replacing library staff with unpaid volunteers. Indeed, it pays to acknowledge the fact that in this current economic climate of budget cuts and rate capping, the enlistment of volunteer help can be a tricky road to hoe, and "any insinuation that library staff are dispensable and

replaceable hurts all libraries.” (Gutsche, 2012) Rather, the Get Involved philosophy is about enhancing and augmenting library services, programs, advocacy and support through strategic and meaningful volunteerism beyond shelving, dusting and sorting. Get Involved pays heed to the American Library Association’s stance on using volunteers in libraries, which stipulates that “volunteers should not supplant or displace established staff position places.” (ALA, 1971) Similarly, the ALIA statement on voluntary work in library and information services reiterates these guidelines and the central tenets of the Get Involved initiative:

Use of volunteers in library and information services for specific purposes is acceptable but must never compromise the quality of service provision, nor replace paid employment in any way.

Library services can be enhanced by well supported volunteers, and providing volunteers with meaningful community roles is a legitimate function of a public library service. (ALIA, 2009)

What’s really interesting about Get Involved is that it was not originally the product of economic requirement. Indeed, it was funded for and launched in 2008 just before the Global Economic Crisis hit, which for the US, was the worst since the Great Depression, and is widely referred to as the Great Recession. The fact that Get Involved was, however, bubbling away in its nascent stages during this time, meant that Californian libraries were equipped to meet the dearth of federal and state funding, which basically amounted to nothing in 2011. And this is in stark contrast to what occurred in the UK public library realm where hundreds of libraries have closed down since the GEC, and the appearance of ‘community libraries’ basically volunteered librarians out of work (see BBC News, 2016).

Through awareness-raising, training, and resource support, Get Involved is attracting high-impact, skilled volunteers to add value to public library services and programs in a collaborative relationship that on the one hand, supports and enables libraries to offer more to their constituents and extend their capacity in the community, and on the other, provides the community with opportunities for engagement and ‘placemaking.’ Within this model,

“the library defines the desired outcomes and volunteers specifically recruited for the project use their skills and knowledge to reach these goals. Outcome attainment, not just hours of service, define a successful volunteer.” (Young, 2012)

Understanding emerging trends in volunteerism

To be effective, volunteer programming in libraries must be relevant, and respond to current trends:

“Understanding emerging trends in volunteering and what motivates different people to volunteer will enable the development of more tailored strategies to attract and engage with volunteers.” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 12)

Back in 1994, Sally Gardner Reed, Executive Director of United for Libraries, (a division of ALA that advocates for volunteers and Friends of Libraries), criticised the lack of engagement librarians actively sought with their volunteers. By taking a new

approach to volunteers, she argued, “by spending the time and effort necessary to develop a well-managed volunteer work force that includes aggressive recruitment and systematic placement, training and development,” the value and volume of volunteer services can be enhanced immeasurably. (Gardner Reed, 1994, p.1)

There is a growing understanding in the field of volunteerism that generational interests and the expectations of volunteers have changed the face of volunteering. Today’s volunteers want experiences where they can use their skills and know-how, make an impact in their community, and have flexibility in their volunteer schedule. Younger, “new” volunteers often bring excellent experience from the workforce, and have higher expectations of voluntary organisations – they feel they can afford to be choosy, and are more attracted to project-based or episodic voluntary roles or even virtual volunteering. (See Graff, 2009; see also Volunteering Victoria, 2014). For youth, committing to lengthy hours of actual service on regular days is not something that can fit as easily “into their hectic and complex lives, [as] for example, project-based and virtual volunteering.” (Volunteering Victoria, 2014, p. 10) Similarly, Australians now approaching retirement or semi-retirement have a higher average education and skill level than the previous generation, and “as a consequence, they [also] have high expectations of their volunteer experience.” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 14) The Boomer generation, in particular, “expects to have a variety of choices and volunteering options that are inspiring and provide them with opportunities to contribute professionally.” (Aumann et al., p.8)

The effect that differing motivations for, and expectations of, volunteering has had on the sector is that the volunteer of the past who exhibits long-term dedication to a single organisation is on the wane. Indeed, Australia's *National Volunteering Strategy* reports that while more people are volunteering, the average number of hours a volunteer gives in a week decreased almost 20% in the ten-year period from 1995 to 2006 (p.12). Volunteer-involving organisations are noting that people like to spread their volunteering across different causes and organisations and don't want to be locked in to never-ending commitments (see Graff, 2009).

As well as catering for different incentives and volunteering models, the volunteering sector acknowledges the need to provide for inclusivity in volunteer roles. The *Volunteering Victoria Manifesto* (2014) reports that available data suggests that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Australians have lower rates of volunteering than other segments of the community. A priority area for action of this policy platform is 'multicultural volunteering.' Engaging volunteers with a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds enables organisations to build stronger links to their local communities, and creates greater social cohesion, and pathways for community connection:

“Volunteering Victoria sees volunteering as ‘active citizenship’ and believes that increasing volunteering by members of the multicultural community can facilitate social inclusion, and also enhance service delivery to this community.” (Volunteering Victoria, 2014, p.9)

Innovation in designing volunteer roles

Get Involved demonstrates that the most significant response to episodic volunteering, shifting demographics and the search for meaningful volunteering opportunities should be in *volunteer position design*. Organisations that continue to concentrate volunteer involvement in long-term, or worse, apparently never-ending positions, are designing involvement that is out of sync with the available volunteer labour pool. Volunteering needs to be attractive if it is to compete with all of the other demands and attractions in people's lives, and consequently, creativity and 'outside the box' thinking are required in volunteer position design. The traditional work done by long-term volunteers is simply not appealing to today's volunteers who are seeking meaningful volunteering opportunities wherein they can contribute their own expertise on a flexible basis.

When thinking about creating volunteer roles for our libraries, Carla Lehn states emphatically that we first need to start with our overall, strategic approach: *Make it clear: why we are doing this?* What do we want from our volunteers, and how does our approach to volunteering sit within our strategic vision? Indeed, *What is our volunteerism mission statement?* Lehn argues that when designing this initial statement of philosophy, it pays to bear in mind that

“One size does not fit all – it must reflect your library's philosophy, and be 'owned' and understood by the people who will make it work. Remember: everything else about the volunteer program is driven by this initial statement of philosophy.” (Lehn, 1999, p. 19)

Interestingly, when I surveyed Victorian library services to get a feel for how the industry regarded volunteering at a strategic level, I found that whilst more than 90% of library services utilised the services of volunteers, less than half of respondents (40%) said that their program was bespoke, with the same number describing theirs as a 'patchwork quilt' and half again (20%) opting to label theirs a 'long-lived hand-me-down'. Moreover, only 33% of respondents had a strategic plan for their volunteer program.

Successful library volunteer engagement programs working on the Get Involved model identify a need or a gap in service provision, and put it 'out there' for the public to respond to. Volunteers with the necessary skills for outcome achievement are recruited for specific projects, ensuring a communally rewarding outcome for all involved. A key feature of Get Involved is that volunteers are recruited in libraries to work on specific projects in the same way that paid positions are advertised and filled:

- a position description is drawn up;
- hopeful volunteers must apply;
- short-listed applicants are interviewed to assess their suitability for the role.

Job descriptions are the planning tools that underpin the success of the volunteer program. The volunteer role description is a kind of 'contract' that serves firstly to recruit and place potential volunteers and subsequently, to clarify roles between and among staff and volunteers, defining where the position fits into the organisational

structure, how it will be supervised, and what kind of training is required. When designing volunteer roles, Lehn extols that it pays to assume the business management approach of *marketing* rather than *selling*. Whereas a seller focuses on existing products with no concern for customer value and satisfaction, a marketer *starts* with the customer in an effort to understand their needs and wants in order to then develop products or services to satisfy them. When we can identify the volunteer's reasons or motivation for volunteering, we can match it to the right job – “the job that will satisfy their motivation, and will help us at the same time.” (Lehn, 1999, p. 31)

Not only do the volunteer jobs need to be clearly thought-out and articulated, they must also be meaningful. The job description shouldn't just describe *what* the volunteers do, but *why* the position is important. *What purpose is that person fulfilling for the library service or branch?* According to Lehn, one of the most important and yet most overlooked sections of the volunteer role description is a blurb setting out the benefits of volunteering:

“Asking yourself what the potential volunteer will gain from the experience helps you define your recruitment approach. When you recruit, you'll know who you're looking for, and where to look. When you interview, you will not only help potential volunteers understand the job, but what they might gain by volunteering for it. By doing this, you're taking a marketing approach to volunteer recruitment – you're defining what the library has to exchange with the potential volunteer.” (Lehn, 1999: 37)

Further, the nuts and bolts of the role description must provide for some flexibility so as not to preclude key demographics – namely Baby Boomers and young people. Including specified time commitments in the description – *how many hours a week* and an *end/review date* for the role – enables volunteers to be realistic about whether they can undertake the position and underscores the importance of the role to the organisation. Building in an end or review date into the volunteer role description/plan also gives volunteer managers an opportunity to assess how the role is progressing, and gives both parties a polite ‘out’ if things are not working to plan.

When thinking about designing volunteer roles, the California experience proves that it pays to be creative. Some examples of innovative volunteer roles launched by Californian public libraries are:

- Instagram accountant
- Citizenship coach
- Teen texpert
- Web wrangler
- Twitter tweeter
- ‘Book buddies’ for housebound services
- Genealogist genies
- Lawyers in the library

Harnessing technology

Online volunteer matching services is a growing industry. Many not-for-profit organisations use their own websites and social media to engage with a diverse range of potential volunteers and match them to suitable roles. Several intermediary websites match volunteers on behalf of other organisations. Some services target specific groups or geographic areas, but many are general matching sites, such as Seek Volunteer (www.volunteer.com.au), and GoVolunteer (www.govolunteer.com.au). Online volunteer matching services are a great way to target under-represented groups, such as youth, or large groups of skilled volunteers, such as the members of a professional body.

California State Library has secured a partnership with Volunteer Match (www.volunteermatch.org), which is a not-for-profit volunteer placement agency based in San Francisco. They're a pretty young team of project managers and IT wizards with some big names on their books, including American Red Cross and the Girl Guides. They're all about connecting volunteers with organisations and vice versa. Get Involved, through California State Library funding, provides all Californian public libraries with a Volunteer Match account that enables them to post roles descriptions for skilled volunteers to work on specific projects, and Volunteer Match marries applicants with the libraries. Potential volunteers can either be recruited via the vast net that is the Volunteer Match portal; or they can be enlisted via the library's website, as Volunteer Match also creates a syndication page for each participating library service, which appears on the library's website as 'their own' volunteer webpage. This duality captures the regular audience of library

volunteer seekers as well as those looking from outside in. When people search Volunteer Match for volunteer opportunities, they can do so by local area, within the parameters of broad subject headings (e.g., arts and culture), or by industry (including libraries).

Through a partnership with LinkedIn, Volunteer Match also utilises 'push' delivery to alert volunteers to suitable volunteering roles. This underscores the capacity for libraries to attract high-skilled volunteers as anyone whose LinkedIn profile indicates that they're interested in volunteering and their skills match those of a library volunteer role on Volunteer Match will have it pushed to them via email.

Further, participating libraries are privy to a vast support network, as Get Involved is backed up by CSL searchable repository of resources and training materials, including management tools, policies and handbooks, webinars and tutorials about best practice, and examples of volunteer position descriptions. Through their partnership with Volunteer Match, Get Involved members are also able to access a wealth of bespoke and generalist support services and training materials.

Recognising and valuing volunteering

For many of us in library land, it pays to be reminded of why working with volunteers is worth the effort. Key to the success of Get Involved has been Carla's

cheerleading approach to the purpose and benefits of a volunteer program for public libraries.

Involving volunteers develops a group of strong library supporters: People who feel part of your library, who understand its issues and who care about it, be terrific messengers. They will advocate for and promote the library in the community. “Often, volunteers can be more credible spokespersons than staff – why? Because staff are paid.” (Lehn, 1999: 13)

Volunteers can enhance library services and programs: Involving volunteers allows us to supplement and broaden what we can offer beyond paid staff hours.

Volunteers can bring their community connections to the library: Your volunteers may already be involved with other community clubs and organisations, and/or have connections to a target population that you’ve been trying to reach – e.g., teens, seniors, newly arrived communities...

Volunteers bring specialised skills: People who have special skills are often happy to share them as volunteers. When thinking about volunteer programming in libraries, it pays to think outside the square beyond the services that we know how to do – and the involvement of people we already know.

Diversity: Volunteerism underscores and enhances libraries’ vitality. To be as relevant as possible to our communities, we need to reflect the diversity of the populations we serve. Volunteers can help us to make those connections. The library is a wonderful place to mix generations and cultures.

Volunteers can free up professional staff time: Library staff are a precious commodity! Giving volunteers supportive jobs to do helps to free up some of that

highly skilled professional time we need to accomplish the tasks for which we're trained.

Volunteers bring new energy and ideas: Volunteers may be of a different mould to staff, and can therefore, bring a new perspective or a creative approach.

Strengthen management and training

Australia's *National Volunteering Strategy* (2011) recognises that volunteer-involving organisations that invest in volunteer management “are more likely to attract and retain their volunteers as valuable and effective members of their teams.” (p.24)

Volunteering peak bodies and resource centres play an important role in assisting volunteer-involving organisations to manage volunteers and meet their regulatory obligations through the provision and coordination of information, training and management tools.

Besides the key message that volunteers can support, not supplant what we do, Get Involved acknowledges that volunteers are not self-managing: it takes planning, organisation and good management to have an effective volunteer program. Crucial to the success of the Get Involved program has been the support network California State Library facilitates for library staff working with volunteers. For the library sector, sharing best practice in volunteer management and programming that is specific to our industry, opens up a world of opportunities. The Get Involved initiative is backed up by an online, searchable repository of resources and training materials, including management tools, policies and handbooks, webinars and tutorials about best practice, and examples of volunteer position descriptions.

Results

At a strategic level, volunteer engagement is fuelled by high-impact, skills-based volunteer opportunities in a project delivery context. For libraries, the volunteer engagement model paves the way for creating an 'open space' in which people can engage with, and contribute to, projects according to their own schedules and skills strengths. By encouraging the utilisation of volunteers' unique talents, volunteer engagement offers all demographics the opportunity to contribute to the cultural output of libraries in ways that are personally gratifying to the individual, and mutually beneficial for the library and community at large. This better meets the needs of today's volunteers, better aligns with the needs of the library, and brings enhanced and expanded library services to the community.

By harnessing a model of volunteer engagement, all library services can build better volunteer programs, and in the process, extend their services and programs, and increase their capacity building, placemaking and cultural output. The Get Involved programming model offers the Australian library sector a suite of benefits that can be both readily applied and extended:

- Best practice models and programming ideas for volunteer engagement programming
- A central ideas portal for volunteering in libraries

Together, these initiatives provide new perspectives on an old issue, and moreover, models, tools and management ideas for best practice library volunteer programming.

As a result of my internship with Get Involved, I have been given permission to share their enormous clearinghouse of resources with the Australian library sector. In the course of my research into volunteer programming in Victorian public libraries, I have sought out examples of tools, policies, handbooks, position descriptions and training materials from the sector to add a local flavour to this information repository. With funding from my Barrett Reid Scholarship, I have employed the services of a web designer to put this information together in an integrated website for all to share: www.volunteersforlibraries.org It is my hope that other library services will see the value in sharing resources and collaborating in the field of volunteerism to enable best practice, and will send through their own examples to further build on the website, and cement the place of volunteer engagement in Australian public libraries.

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