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The Mutual Symbiosis of Volunteerism: A Story of One Academic Library Welcoming Volunteers



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ABSTRACT

Although public and school libraries, as well as many non-profit organizations, regularly utilize volunteers, academic libraries are less likely to welcome them. This article describes the variety of volunteers received at Brown Library and the tasks that they perform. It also presents a discussion of the motivation to accept volunteers, perhaps as a faith practice.

Introduction

Volunteerism is common in many non-profit organizations, as well as in public and school libraries. For some reason, it is less common for academic libraries to utilize volunteers, and the reasons have not been thoroughly researched. Forrest acknowledged that academic libraries in general have been more cautious in accepting volunteers.¹ From a service point of view, the idea of providing the opportunity for individuals to gain work experience or meet volunteer requirements would align with academic libraries' typical mission of service. With the additional Christian perspective, service becomes a faith practice, a religious activity. Welcoming individuals and providing a place of belonging and purpose through volunteering demonstrates such a faith practice.

Librarians at Abilene Christian University's Brown Library welcome volunteers and find appropriate tasks for them to do. These volunteers are undergraduate and graduate students, retirees, individuals with disabilities, and teenagers. There are many reasons for volunteering, different levels of ability, and many tasks that volunteers can be trained to do. In providing this volunteer opportunity, Brown Library staff practice their faith as they join the greater Abilene community in helping people gain work experience and skills, find a place of belonging, and gain

¹ Margaret Forrest, "Student Volunteers in Academic Libraries," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 18, no.1 (April 2012): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2012.660392>.

a sense of purpose. In addition, Brown Library also receives the donated time and effort of these individuals. In giving to each other, volunteers and librarians create a symbiotic relationship. Volunteers receive benefit through their work, and librarians receive benefit by welcoming volunteers and providing training and coaching. This article offers a discussion of the Brown Library experience and suggests that faith-based colleges and universities should welcome volunteers as a demonstration of faith and as a service to the community.

Skeptical Librarians Say “No”

According to the literature surrounding the use of volunteers in academic libraries, skeptical librarians find many reasons to avoid welcoming eager volunteers into their workplace. These reasons may originate in actual experiences or imagined scenarios. This skepticism leads to the loss of rich human interactions, tasks completed without monetary cost, and opportunities to practice one's faith. While the skeptic's reasons may result in rejecting volunteers, librarians at Brown Library find reasons to welcome them.

Brown Library does not recruit volunteers, but they are welcomed. Brown Library, like most academic libraries, regularly hires student employees every year. Staff and librarians understand the need for utilizing this unskilled labor force and accept the advantages and disadvantages that come with this population. Some of the same positives and negatives accompany volunteers as well. Nicol and Johnson claimed that volunteers require a disproportionate amount of time to train and supervise compared to salaried staff.² In academic libraries, librarians know that student employees take time to train and that they require continued coaching along the way. Student employees may also impress their supervisors with what they are able to learn. The same is true of volunteers. Nicol and Johnson reported concerns with a confidentiality problem for libraries because volunteers might have access to patrons' records. In academic libraries, student employees who work at the Circulation Desk are trained about patron record confidentiality.³ Volunteers can be trained in the same way or may do tasks that do not come in contact with patron records. Another reported disadvantage by Nicol and Johnson was a concern that volunteers cannot commit enough time to learn the Integrated Library System (ILS) and might cause major damage.⁴ Student employees working in Collection and Catalog Services at Brown Library have been adding and deleting items, as well as copy cataloging for years. Mistakes are sometimes made, but they can always be fixed. Certain volunteers at Brown Library have learned this and more. What about the concern that volunteers may perform essential services which overlap with paid staff or librarian

2 Erica A. Nicol and Corey M. Johnson, “Volunteers in Libraries: Program Structure, Evaluation, and Theoretical Analysis,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (December 1, 2008): 157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20865035>.

3 Nichol & Johnson, “Volunteers in Libraries,” 158.

4 Nichol & Johnson, “Volunteers in Libraries,” 158.

duties? Student employees have been trained to help librarians and staff accomplish faster what it might take them years to finish without the student employee help. Librarians and staff are not afraid that student employees will take their jobs, so why be concerned with volunteers taking their jobs? While there are valid concerns and real disadvantages in utilizing volunteers, there are also many great reasons to encourage and support volunteer involvement in the academic library.

Brown Library Welcomes Volunteers

Brown Library serves Abilene Christian University, a private Christian university of 5731 residential and online students.⁵ Beginning with the traditional Friends of the Library committee dating back to 1966, Brown Library has had an organized volunteer group of faculty, staff, and alumni who were charged with fundraising tasks. This group of volunteers primarily focused on their fundraising responsibilities and did not volunteer with the daily tasks of the library. In this discussion, the names of volunteers have all been changed to protect their privacy. Historically, there has been a volunteer now and then, but never as many as the Library had in the last 10 years.

The Brown Library staff has had positive experiences welcoming and working with volunteers. Volunteers have come with different motivations, and all of them have contributed in meaningful ways. One primary reason to welcome volunteers according to Leonard is labor without compensation.⁶ There are so many tasks that can be taught to volunteers which move the library toward accomplishing goals. Frevert also noted that the use of volunteers liberates professional staff to concentrate on other duties and projects.⁷ This has been the experience of the supervising catalog librarian at Brown Library. Two retired volunteers, at different times, worked on a specific cataloging project which involved searching for an item in the catalog and OCLC Connexion, adding an item to the catalog, saving a correct record in Connexion, or creating a record using a template. The catalog librarian answered questions and would later edit the records making small corrections, adding correct subject headings, and then exporting the records. The training took place one-on-one over a few weeks which resulted in fairly independent volunteers. The catalog librarian remained in proximity if needed. It is more likely, however, that the tasks for volunteers are less complicated.

Brown Library has welcomed short term volunteers who were looking for work experience related to a job training program called FaithWorks of Abilene. FaithWorks students participate in 60 hours of internships during the last few weeks of class. Students are matched with their internship providers based on their

5 Abilene Christian University, accessed Feb. 15, 2024, <https://acu.edu/about/our-mission/>

6 Kevin B. Leonard, "Volunteers in Archives: Free Labor, But Not Without Cost." *Journal of Library Administration* 52 no.3-4 (April-June 2012): 315, doi:10.1080/01930826.2012.684529.

7 Rhonda Huber Frevert, "Archives Volunteers: Worth the Effort?" *Archival Issues* 22, no.2 (1997): 149, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41101978>.

abilities and long-term employment interests.⁸ One of these students who had limited mobility needed tasks that she could accomplish while sitting. The Director of Collection and Catalog Services put her to work stamping the property stamp, applying security strips, and labeling new books. These routine tasks can be quickly taught and mastered.

Our Special Collections Department also uses volunteers. Leonard lamented that the general population may be unfamiliar with archives, consequently a smaller number of individuals might seek a volunteer position in this department.⁹ Brown Library's Special Collections librarian found a solution to this problem by collaborating with a history professor. They developed a practicum experience in conjunction with the Historical Methods class in which the entire class of students was required to volunteer in Special Collections under the close supervision of the librarian and professor. This arrangement solved the problems of undependable volunteers, motivation, and time to train multiple volunteers discussed by Frevert.¹⁰ This department also had a retiree who volunteered for several years in a row. Repetitive projects like folder-level inventory of manuscript collections, placing items in new archival grade folders and labeling files, and creating finding aids for manuscript collections kept him engaged. When the Special Collections librarian would give this volunteer another big project to work on, he would say, "I hope I live long enough to finish it." This man gave valuable time to the library, and the library benefitted in many ways.

Another category of students to volunteer from time to time has been Library Science graduate students seeking a place to accomplish their required practicum hours. This is also a win for the library because such students have already completed their course work and have some understanding of library work. They are also highly motivated and reliable. ACU students may also seek volunteer hours as a requirement of a scholarship or membership into a club or organization. One group of sorority pledges was put to work dusting the stacks. The library got an undesirable job accomplished and the students received their volunteer credit.

Driggers and Dumas addressed possible issues and solutions when working with volunteers with disabilities.¹¹ Good communication with the individual or his/her mentor will help the volunteer manager identify suitable tasks in which the volunteer can be successful. For over 15 years, Brown Library has welcomed an adult man with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a regular volunteer several days every week. His task is always the same, and he is very good at it; he shelves books in the

8 FaithWorks of Abilene, accessed Nov.14, 2023, <http://faithworksofabilene.org/>.

9 Leonard, "Volunteers in Archives" 315.

10 Frevert, "Archives Volunteers": 150-151.

11 Preston F. Driggers and Eileen Dumas, *Managing Library Volunteers: A Practical Toolkit* (ALA Editions of the American Library Association, 2002), 25.

Stanley Theological Reading Room. Over the years, this volunteer has enjoyed using a computer or reading a book before he gets started with his shelving, and it works well for the library. He feels a sense of belonging and contribution, and the library gets its books shelved perfectly. Another volunteer with disabilities works in our Collection and Catalog department. Elsa has cerebral palsy and uses a motorized wheelchair. Initially, the catalog librarian invited her to volunteer one day a week during a summer when her parents were traveling abroad. The librarian was uncertain what task Elsa could do given her limitations. The first task given to her was discarding microfiche from the catalog. Elsa successfully scanned each microfiche barcode and placed it in a box. She worked through the summer and into the fall on this project, discarding about 100,000 items. Her next big project included labeling and stamping approximately 750 pieces of choral music. Driggers and Dumas reminded their readers not to be quick to judge what a person with disabilities can and cannot do.¹² These projects would have typically been done by student employees. The volunteer accomplished the tasks at a slower pace but completed the work just the same. The library staff have observed the joy and satisfaction of the volunteer who finds a place of belonging and a way to contribute.

A surprising category to add to the list of volunteers is youth (ages 13-18). Driggers and Dumas suggested that youth may want to volunteer to gain work experience or satisfy volunteer requirements of a class or organization such as Scouts. Also mentioned was that a staff member might request a volunteer position for their child.¹³ This was the case with 16-year-old Angie. Angie's parents were looking for work experience for their daughter with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The supervising catalog librarian accepted the challenge and began teaching her the most basic tasks of applying security strips, applying property stamps, and labeling books. Next, she trained on covering book jackets and shelving materials. Angie was quick to learn. The supervising catalog librarian ultimately taught her copy cataloging and searching skills. After a month or two of volunteering, her parents discovered a 12-week program through Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas in which Angie could be paid through Workforce Solutions for her work with the library. This arrangement required the supervising librarian to write goals for Angie and help her work toward them. Angie completed her program and went on to work experiences with other organizations. She continues to volunteer when she can, and it is clear that this experience has been beneficial to her development. Volunteering benefits teens in so many ways as documented by Hernantes et al.¹⁴

12 Driggers and Dumas, *Managing Library Volunteers*, 25.

13 Driggers and Dumas, *Managing Library Volunteers*, 25.

14 Naia Hernantes, María J. Pumar-Méndez, Olga López-Dicastillo, Andrea Iriarte, and Agurtzane Mujika, "Volunteerism as Adolescent Health Promotion Asset: A Scoping Review," *Health Promotion International* 35 no.3 (2020), 621, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daz026>.

Nicol and Johnson listed several disadvantages of having volunteers, but human relations were not one of them.¹⁵ When people work together, sometimes problems arise. Driggers and Dumas listed several questions to consider when deciding to “de-volunteer” a volunteer.¹⁶ Danielle was a challenging volunteer. She had been invited to volunteer by the director of the library. Although an adult, she had never held a full-time job. She could be described as being socially or emotionally immature. According to WebMD, “people who are emotionally immature don’t meet society’s expectations for social behavior within their age range.”¹⁷ Danielle was originally assigned to the Circulation Desk supervisor where she primarily shelved books. When a new Circulation Desk supervisor was hired, the working relationship became strained and Danielle was sad and emotional. To alleviate the strain, Danielle was removed from that supervisory relationship and placed with another librarian, which helped to solve the problem. Volunteers can bring a mixed bag to the library. Each person is unique with different abilities, and each one brings different motivations. Occasionally, one will bring challenges.

Symbiotic Relationship

In nature, animals from different species will sometimes form unexpectedly close bonds and work to their mutual benefit. According to BiologyOnline, the word “symbiosis” comes from two Greek words, “*σύν*”, meaning “together” and “*βίωσις*”, meaning “living” so it means “living together.” The benefits of this kind of relationship range widely. In the animal world, for example, a benefit can be a service provided, such as cleaning, pollination, seed dispersal. A benefit can also be a resource provided, such as food or shelter.¹⁸ Volunteering can be seen this way as well. It is clear that the volunteer provides a service to the library free of charge, but what does the library provide in return? Each of the volunteers at Brown Library received a unique benefit. The students who needed volunteer hours received volunteer hours. The retired adults received meaningful work, which helped to keep their minds active, and human contact, which makes life enjoyable. The individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder received acceptance, respect, and a place of belonging along with tasks which provided a feeling of contribution. When academic libraries open their environment to a variety of volunteers, the benefits multiply.

¹⁵ Nichol & Johnson, “Volunteers in Libraries,” 157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20865035>.

¹⁶ Driggers and Dumas, *Managing Library Volunteers*, 29.

¹⁷ WebMD, “What is Emotional Immaturity?,” accessed Jan.10, 2023, <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-is-a-emotional-immaturity>.

¹⁸ BiologyOnline, “Mutualistic symbiosis,” accessed November 14, 2023, <https://www.biologyonline.com/dictionary/mutualistic-symbiosis>

Faith in the Library

Christian colleges and universities provide an environment of faith in which to study and work. Many of these institutions include faith in their mission statements with phrases such as “service to God and humanity” or “caring community” or “Christian faith values.” The mission statements proclaim a goal to educate students in more than academics. The goal of the Christian university is to integrate faith into the learning of its students. Christian colleges and universities usually hire individuals who profess a desire to live by Christian faith values. Because the Christian higher education environment is infused with Christian values, employees and students alike are often encouraged to live out their faith in practical ways. Libraries which serve Christian colleges and universities possess a very unique environment with people of faith and never-ending tasks which can be taught to volunteers and managed with little effort. Providing opportunities to volunteers with kindness and generosity is a practical way to live out one’s faith. Christian librarians demonstrate their faith when they extend a welcome reception to individuals who need a place of belonging, human connection, and a sense of contribution.

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