Engaging and Retaining Today’s Student Volunteers

By Gayle Spencer, PhD, and Billye Potts

Recruiting volunteers to participate in student organizations has never been an easy task. With rising tuition costs, today’s students are more likely to work. In addition, there are many more distractions that keep them from participating in student organizations. As student affairs professionals and student leaders on campus, we must remember the value of the out-of-classroom experience and use this as a selling point while recruiting them for student organizations. It is also important to take into account today’s Millennial students and what that designation means in terms of their interests, the ways they communicate and how they spend their time.
We will look at today’s Millennial students and what we know about them. We will review research that shows the importance of volunteering and examine a member acquisition and retention model. We will also suggest reasons why people volunteer, as well as ways to make volunteering experiences significant. Finally, we will present ideas others on campuses are using to attract today’s college students to join and participate in student organizations.

The Millennials

The Millennial Generation consists of those Americans born from 1982 to the present. The seven core characteristics of this group are:
1) sheltered;
2) pressured;
3) achieving;
4) conventional;
5) special;
6) team-oriented; and
7) confident (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

The characteristics that would most help us when recruiting these students are team-oriented, pressured and achieving. The Millennials are very team-oriented and influenced by their peers. This provides us with an opportunity to use current group members to influence other students to join. These students are accustomed to being under pressure and may view college as a place to try to gain balance in their lives. Hence, being able to convince these students that volunteering will create opportunities to develop life skills is a selling point. Finally, Millennials are high-achieving students who expect leadership opportunities as they matriculate through college. Out-of-classroom experiences are an ideal venue for them.

The Importance of Volunteering

The importance of involvement in college is evident. Research on traditional-age college students has found students who were involved in cocurricular activities reported more positive educational and social experiences, increased intellectual and leadership development, success in academic and career goals, and were more likely to graduate (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Kuh, Schuh and Whitt, 1991; Williams and Winston, 1985). The out-of-classroom experience can be, and often is, as important as what a student learns in the classroom. We must promote this as we recruit students to be involved.

In the annual national survey of incoming freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, 45.4% of college freshmen plan to participate in clubs and organizations in college (Farrell, 2005). Of incoming freshmen, 59.7% rated themselves above average or in the highest 10% of

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leadership ability among their peers (Farrell, 2005). Clearly, these students are interested in volunteering and believe they are leaders.

**Member Acquisition and Retention Model**

It is to everyone’s advantage for students to be involved. More students participating in student groups means stronger organizations, more activities and a stronger campus life experience for everyone. The member acquisition and retention model we discuss here (Zuckerman and Kretovics, 2003) helps us to understand how to approach and retain students in quality involvements on campus. The four stages of this model are:

1. Awareness
2. Attraction
3. Affiliation
4. Retention

In the early stages of this model, students learn about organizations and check for a personal fit. Students will continue into later stages of this model if they fit into the group dynamic and the organization meets their needs.

- **Awareness**—In the awareness stage, a student first becomes aware of an organization. Examples of this would be attending a student organization expo, seeing sidewalk chalkings or an advertisement in the student newspaper about a student organization’s meeting or event. As a student becomes aware and interested in a group, they move into the attraction stage.

- **Attraction**—In the attraction stage, a student becomes a partial participant in the group. They might attend an event or meeting. The student knows of the group, but is unsure of details about the organization. They are looking to fit in. In this stage, it is important for an existing group member to befriend or become acquainted with the new member. The existing member should also begin to give the new member information about the group’s activities, events, values and operations. If the new member sees themselves fitting in, they will then want to become a full member of the group.

- **Affiliation**—In the affiliation stage, the new member should receive some type of training or education about the organization, including the group’s history, values, vision and future plans. This would also be the time to help a new member find their place in the group, including building relationships, volunteering and participating in group activities.

- **Retention**—In the final stage, retention, a member will stay if they find personal benefits and satisfaction by belonging to the group and participating in activities. This is important, as this is the key to
having students renew their interest in the group and continue as members.

Why People Volunteer

When looking to see why people volunteer, Levesque (2002) interviewed volunteers to learn why they served. According to one volunteer, Gary Cumbee: "...it was a combination of interest in the issue and passion for the larger cause." Another volunteer talked about being a student and getting the chance to manage; gaining business experience that can be hard to come by for younger people. In addition, volunteers need to believe they are capable and that they can make an immediate impact. Younger volunteers are looking for the chance to make a difference, to meet new people, to learn new skills, and to belong (Levesque, 2002).

Another selling point and reason people volunteer is to use the experience as an outlet for skills and talents not used in work. For college students, this could be the chance to do something outside the classroom that is different than their major or the classes they are taking. Students may have special skills or abilities they would like to continue to use.

Ways to Make Volunteering Significant

So, how do we attract Millennial students to volunteer with our organizations? Here are areas where we might focus our efforts.

- Take Advantage of Technology

  Clearly, taking advantage of all the technology available to us is the first step. Word of mouth is a big communication strategy with Millennials, so find students who can spread the word to others via e-mail, text messaging, instant messaging, websites and chat rooms. Use these information outlets yourself, as well.

- Foster Relationships

  Relationships are important to these students and they like to be in groups. Therefore, we might want to seek ways to bring groups of students into an organization, rather than recruiting people individually. Consider a new member class in a Greek letter organization or a residence hall floor. Once these students become part of the group, it would also be important to assign them mentors to help guide them through their group experiences. Mentors could also follow up with each new member and personally contact them to ensure their return to group meetings and activities.

- Employ Defined-Duration Projects

  Also consider having volunteer projects of defined duration. Some people can assist for only a short while or have only a particular interest. Allow students to come in and out of an organization as their time allows. It is important for volunteers to feel their time is well spent. With the busy schedules of students today, this may be an ideal way to involve more of them.

- Be Aware of Students' Time Constraints

  Student organizations and student activities offices are beginning to understand the time commitments of student volunteers with whom they work and are developing new ways to keep students involved while respecting their schedules. In surveying colleagues across the country, we discovered some innovative ways of working with student volunteers. For example, in recruiting members for student groups, some schools administer freshman interest surveys during orientation. The survey results are used to follow up with students by having interest parties and special receptions within the first few weeks of classes. Sending e-mail to welcome new students on campus and explain involvement opportunities is used on several campuses, and online electronic applications are also popular.

  While establishing interest and trying to keep students involved, organizations have had to re-think meetings and how to use students' time to everyone's advantage. Some schools have started using instant messaging to communicate with students. At Marquette University (WI), for example,
According to Levesque (2002), volunteers want:

- To believe they are capable and can make an impact;
- A chance to make a difference;
- To learn new skills; and
- To belong.

Make volunteering significant by:

- Taking advantage of technology;
- Fostering relationships;
- Employing defined-duration projects;
- Being aware of students’ time constraints; and
- Understanding the importance of meeting locations.

Research and Creativity Are Key

Thinking outside of the box is a must when working with Millennial students. Developing innovative ways to get and keep them involved is imperative. Using what the research tells us regarding this generation along with creativity, we can develop very effective ways of recruiting these students and keeping them involved. Attention to the students, understanding their time constraints, and reaching out through technology are prime ways to them engage and involve them.

Selected References

Levesque, C.J. (2002). Talk about the passion: Today’s volunteerism is about making an impact and seeing the results, say volunteer leaders. Association Management, 34, 50-59.


About the Authors

Gayle Spencer, PhD, is assistant dean of Student Life at Kansas State University. She holds a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, a master's degree in college student personnel from Western Illinois University and a doctorate in student counseling and health personnel services from Kansas State University. A long-time NACA volunteer, she has served in capacities ranging from serving on the former National Convention Committee and regional coordinator (former NACA Illiana Region) to chair of the Multicultural Education Task Force and Chair of the NACA Board of Directors. She is a past recipient of the former Illiana Region’s Janet Carl Smith Award and the former South Central Region’s Markley Award. Active in the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), she has also participated in Chi Omega Sorority and the Association of College Unions-International (ACUI). In 1994, she received ACPA’s Commission for Student Involvement Research Award.

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