

**Volunteerism: Encouraging Individuals to Effect Societal Change**

View the [Archived Social Change Conference](#) held October 27, 2010.

**We received a number of unique and interesting questions that we were not able to address during the conference, so we asked our panelists to respond to a few more:**

**Question:** Currently, I serve on a board in my community to provide community-related services. However, in serving on this board, I have noticed that the community agency does not provide a certain type of service to the community. How can I work with the board to convince them to complete a needs assessment to determine what services are actually needed for this community?

**Dr. Gary Kelsey:** *As a board member, it is a legitimate role to suggest research (needs assessment, in this case) if it provides information that furthers the mission of the organization. I would make this suggestion to both the executive director and board chair. Ask that the issue be raised for discussion at the next board meeting.*

**Question:** I have been invited to join the patient advisory committee at my doctor's office, and I want to use that role to make an impact on the health of my community through free programs and education. How do I present my ideas without coming across as threatening or overbearing?

**Dr. Gary Kelsey:** *I would first approach the chair and ask when it is appropriate to raise issues/needs that are important to you. Given that you have been asked to sit on an advisory committee, it is certainly appropriate for you to advise! Don't be shy about this but ask where on the agenda this type of discussion might take place. You may also send your ideas directly to the executive director.*

**Question:** We are a small church. How do we get people to volunteer? Our people are Native Americans and have been trained to let the missionary do everything for them. How do we break that cycle?

**Dr. Gary Kelsey:** *In the times I have had the opportunity to work with members of a tribe, I have asked for group input on issues, as it was my understanding that shared leadership was the accepted model. I would approach tribe leadership for advice and have a general discussion with Native American members about what would motivate them to volunteer.*

**Question:** How can people who want to volunteer, but struggle with feelings of inadequacy or fear that they will not have enough knowledge or skills to be really helpful, be encouraged or equipped to have the courage to get out there and be engaged in volunteering?

**Dr. Gary Kelsey:** *It is helpful to stress that new volunteers will receive orientation and training. Also assure them that they will be supported and have a contact to discuss needs and issues. Having a detailed job description may also be helpful.*

**Question:** What do you think of creating a professional-services data bank so that organizations could access it and identify what they need? I mean, that we provide our knowledge, experience, and services to help others when they need it?

**Dr. Gary Kelsey:** *I recommend checking out the [Walden Service Network](#) online. It appears to be just the type of resource you are looking for.*

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**Question:** In what way can I start a nonprofit to reach out to children who are trying to get back to school to achieve their GED or college degree?

**Dr. Gary Kelsey:** *I would start by contacting both your state secretary of state's office and office of the attorney general to request publications related to creating a nonprofit organization. You may find resources from both state offices online, as well.*

**Question:** How do you get skilled volunteers to help your organization? Are they always going to be people that have no skills?

**Jaime Hiraishi:** *We post for most of our pro bono opportunities on volunteer boards (like [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) and [www.volunteermatch.com](http://www.volunteermatch.com)) and also many large job boards. We have been able to successfully employ pro bono services for our rebranding and new Web site, a donor database implementation, HR infrastructure building, and an office remodel. The list is endless on ways pro bono can be used to strengthen an organization, but I would first identify the top strategic needs of the organization and see if those can be met through pro bono.*

**Question:** What are some ways to motivate busy college students to become involved with volunteerism? On our campus, many students refuse to become involved in "service learning" unless it's required for a class. How do you motivate busy faculty to go beyond service-learning projects in the classroom?

**Jaime Hiraishi:** *I would stress the mutual benefits of volunteering. There is a reason service learning is also commonly referred to as experiential learning—students are able to gain valuable hands-on experience with clients they might otherwise be unable to attain and are able to expand their professional networks. With today's job market, any edge against the competition is a plus! Also, the most popular programs I have seen often include clients in a different area (even country) and the students get to travel to those sites during a school break to complete the project.*

**Question:** Please share some good ideas of how to express appreciation for volunteers (i.e., volunteer banquets). Why is this important?

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *Two of the most overlooked ways to recognize volunteers are taking the time to help them fully understand the difference they are making at your organization and, believe it or not, asking them to do more! Think about how good it would feel to hear something like this as a volunteer: "We're so appreciative of the work you do on behalf of our clients and know that you care deeply about our mission, so we wanted to see if you would be interested in taking on more of a leadership role as a volunteer with us." Even if you couldn't do it, you would feel pretty valued, wouldn't you?*

For even more concrete ideas, see pages 12 and 13 of Business Volunteers Unlimited's [workbook for volunteer managers](#).

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**Question:** What are the things that derail volunteers, precluding effective and efficient services on a regular basis?

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *The number one thing that derails volunteers is the feeling that their skills and time are not being utilized well. Not returning emails and phone calls on a timely basis, not being prepared for volunteers when they arrive, and assigning them to different tasks than they expected can all contribute to the problem. By strengthening these basic aspects of volunteer management, you can go a long way toward ensuring that volunteers who are passionate about your mission will remain invested in your organization.*

**Question:** How can a stay-at-home mom get involved in contributing to social change? I do not have connections.

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *I don't know where you're located, but you can definitely search [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) and enter "volunteer from home" to see hundreds of opportunities to provide volunteer support to organizations from home. Writing, graphic design, management of social media accounts, and basic finance work are a few examples of the types of volunteer activities you can do from home.*

**Question:** Are there any surveys that you are aware of that can be used in a community to gather feedback regarding needs for that community?

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *If you do a Web search for "community needs assessment," you'll come across a wealth of information on this topic. A word of caution, though: These survey tools can be pretty unwieldy if you attempt to assess all needs at once. One suggestion could be bringing together a diverse group of key stakeholders in your community for an initial discussion. You might want to begin by having this group participate in a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis discussion for your community to see if any themes emerge. I think this can be helpful at the start because a) it can narrow down the scope of questions you include on a follow-up survey in the community, and b) it helps define not only challenges but also things that are working well that can be leveraged in your efforts.*

**Question:** I live in the Maryland area, and I'm a master's student in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Walden. I would like to know how I could get involved with the BVU (Business Volunteers Unlimited) organization. I am interested in education and social services.

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *A great way to get started as an individual volunteer is by visiting BVU's [Volunteer Central](#) Web site. This is a powerful search engine where you can look for volunteer opportunities based on interests like education and social services, your geographic area, or a combination of criteria. On the education front, we also have a program called PENCIL that matches local business leaders/teams with local public schools. [Read more](#). We would love to have you join our ever-growing community of Baltimore-area volunteers!*

**Question:** Do you find that there are volunteer activities that individuals can do from their home as opposed to going to an organization or getting out in the community?

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**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *Yes, absolutely. A few major categories that come to mind relate to writing assignments, graphic design, and the use of social media. Little or no face time at an organization is necessary to volunteer in these roles, and they can provide tremendous benefit to organizations. There can also be opportunities to do some basic accounting/bookkeeping tasks from home.*

**Question:** I'm a Walden Ph.D. in Public Health candidate from St. Louis. I work with Safe Kids. We get a lot of volunteers who are meeting public-service needs for fraternities and sororities. They usually only have 4 hours to offer. How do you deal with short-term volunteers?

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *I think one of the critical rules for volunteers, no matter how long or short they are with you, is to provide them with the best sense of accomplishment possible. So even when they only volunteer for 4 hours, make time to explain to them how what they did is important for your organization and/or your clients. If they're just completing part of a project for you, give them a sense of when others will be coming in to pick up where they left off and when the project is estimated to be completed. And always be sure to link your thank-you message with a list of additional ways individuals can support your organization with gifts of time, talent, and treasure.*

**Question:** It is one thing to commit to volunteering but another to stay committed. How do you stay committed to a volunteer program without getting overwhelmed and entangled in work, school, and family? Once committed, it is important to stay committed from start to finish.

**Dr. Jim Dickinson:** *In taking on a new volunteer role, it's important to realistically assess your availability up front. It's much easier to start slow and work your way into deeper commitments over time. That is especially important when you are considering a role such as that of a mentor, which requires long-term dedication to your mentee. You might want to ask a nonprofit if it has some episodic opportunities to get involved before committing to a longer-term relationship. It's also important to recognize that sometimes situations change and we can find ourselves overwhelmed. In those cases, I'd recommend having an honest conversation with people connected to the commitments that feel like too much and working together on making the situation more manageable.*

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