Engaging Teen Volunteers: Tips for Success

Museums often involve teen volunteer and docents, either in programs designed especially for youth or in regular volunteer positions when they meet a minimum age requirement. After school, on weekends, and during school vacations, young volunteers infuse museums with energy. Working with teens requires time, flexibility, and appreciation for their adolescent individuality. A how-to manual from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which is known for its teen programs, makes this observation: “There is a teen version and an adult version for everything. Reality is somewhere in the middle.”

Are museums capturing the full potential of teen volunteers? Many adults understand that working with young people is a good idea, but they don’t always envision what teens can contribute, says Deborah Fisher, author of Working Shoulder to Shoulder: Stories and Strategies of Youth-Adult Partnerships that Succeed. What’s needed, she explains, are engaging relationships with teen volunteers in which they have meaningful opportunities to contribute, work alongside adults as partners, and are seen as active players rather than recipients of services.

Moving from basic volunteer involvement to deeper engagement requires taking some intentional steps within the volunteer program and throughout the museum:

1. **Make a museum-wide commitment.** Organizational support for teen volunteering—beginning with the executive director’s backing—creates a welcoming environment for teens, inspires success, and promotes a

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Youth@Bruce, the Bruce Museum’s teen volunteer group (see page 6)
There’s a buzz in the air, and it’s not just the bees and mosquitoes! This spring AAMV members (and especially a number of our board members) were active at two conferences where we were part of stimulating workshops and presentations and informal exchanges with colleagues in the museum and public garden worlds.

At the American Association of Museums (AAM) Annual Meeting in May we participated in three sessions: an always-useful roundtable to address burning issues and brainstorm good ideas and sessions on volunteer interns and art museum docents. AAMV is an affiliate group with AAM, and it is clear in meeting with other affiliate leaders and AAM staff that the key role volunteers play in museums and the need to continue to build good volunteer management are definitely on the radar screen in the museum world.

At the annual conference of the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) it also became apparent that those working in public gardens (which are often linked with historic houses and art collections) are also conscious of the importance of volunteers and docents and the need to build programs to serve them. This conference included a track devoted exclusively to volunteers running through its four days. And the APGA has a section of garden professionals focused on building volunteer programs.

We hope in the coming year to bring you news of more opportunities for you to share ideas with colleagues at conferences at both national and local levels, so you can share the buzz.

Lois Kuter
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This AAMV publication stimulates creative thinking about finding, training, supervising, and supporting volunteers in a changing environment. Purchase your copy for $29.95 at www.authorhouse.com, or visit the AAMV website at www.AAMV.org for more information and a link to order the book.

AAMV Newsletter

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This newsletter is a quarterly publication of the American Association for Museum Volunteers, the nonprofit membership and service organization dedicated to the millions of volunteers in all categories of museums in the United States and to professionalism in museum volunteer program management. AAMV welcomes submissions of manuscripts for publication. Queries should be made to the President. Information about AAMV’s other services is available at www.AAMV.org.
## Call for AAMV Board Nominations

The American Association for Museum Volunteers is accepting nominations until for board members for terms beginning in November 2011. As a board member, you have the opportunity to advance the important work of AAMV on behalf of volunteers and volunteer program managers in museums of all types and sizes nationwide. **The deadline for nominations is Monday, August 15, 2011.**

AAMV board responsibilities include:
- Being an AAMV member in good standing
- Having an awareness and understanding of AAMV programs and projects
- Attending and participating in semiannual board meetings
- Leading or participating in the work of a committee and/or programs and/or projects
- Networking and working with other volunteer managers and/or volunteers in your area about AAMV
- Understanding that AAMV is an all-volunteer organization with a working board that requires a time and energy commitment

If you or someone you know is interested in serving on the AAMV board, please let us know. Self-nominations are acceptable.

Nine positions will be filled: Vice-President, Secretary, Membership Director, Northeast Regional Directors (two positions), Western Regional Director, Midwest Regional Director, Southeast Regional Director, and the new position of Webmaster.

Interested parties should submit a brief bio, a statement on why they are interested in being a board member, and what skills or experience they could use to further the mission and goals of AAMV. Board and/or volunteer experience or nonprofit affiliations are useful but not necessary. Knowing about work experience, educational background, and interests helps our board evaluate candidates and match new board members’ interests to programs and projects.

Submissions and questions can be sent to Tim Deegan, tdeegan@lacma.org.

## Calendar

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<th>Date and Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.aza.org">www.aza.org</a></td>
<td>September 12–17, 2011, Atlanta, GA</td>
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<td>American Association for State and Local history (AASLH)</td>
<td><a href="http://aaslh.org">http://aaslh.org</a></td>
<td>September 14–17, 2011, Richmond, VA</td>
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<td>Western Museums Association (WMA)</td>
<td><a href="http://westmuse.wordpress.com">http://westmuse.wordpress.com</a></td>
<td>September 23–26, 2011, Honolulu, HI</td>
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<td>National Docent Symposium</td>
<td><a href="http://www.slam.org/nds2011/">www.slam.org/nds2011/</a></td>
<td>October 2–5, 2011, St. Louis, MO</td>
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<td>Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.midatlanticmuseums.org">www.midatlanticmuseums.org</a></td>
<td>October 9–12, 2011, Baltimore, MD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.astc.org">www.astc.org</a></td>
<td>October 15–18, 2011, Baltimore, MD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mountain-Plains Museums Association (MPMA)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mpma.net">www.mpma.net</a></td>
<td>October 17–21, 2011, Helena, MT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southeastern Museums Conference (SEMC)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.semdirect.net">www.semdirect.net</a></td>
<td>October 25–27, 2011, Greenville, SC</td>
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## At-Large AAM Session Proposals Due August 31

The American Association of Museums invites at-large proposals for sessions at the 2012 Annual Meeting in Minneapolis–St. Paul. The theme is *Creative Community*. The deadline for these proposals, which do not involve the endorsement of a Standing Professional Committee, is August 31. For detailed session proposal guidelines, go to: [http://www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

Proposals for AAMV-sponsored sessions were submitted in mid-July. To give volunteer-related issues the maximum exposure, volunteers and volunteer program managers are encouraged to propose other sessions as well.
Currents in Museum Education: Gateway to the Best is the theme of the National Docent Symposium, hosted from October 2–5, 2011, by the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Saint Louis Art Museum Docents. The biennial event, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary, promises first-rate educational lectures and interactive workshops, tours of local museums and private collections, and social events for more than 400 docents and staff from all over North America. To register, go to: www.slam.org/nds2011/registration.php.

Outstanding speakers will offer food for thought on current issues and practices. Michael Cassin, director of the Center for Education in the Visual Arts at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA, opens the symposium with a keynote speech. Other speakers are art and costume historian Elizabeth Semmelhack, curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto; Mike Murawski, director of school services at the Saint Louis Art Museum; and Dan Reich, curator and director of education at the St. Louis Holocaust Museum and Learning Center.

The symposium features 5 breakout sessions with a total of 41 courses presented by docents and staff from more than 30 museums. Among the topics are how museums can play a vital role in sparking creative thinking; engaging secondary school students; managing docent evaluations; incorporating visitor conversations in interpretive strategies; and partnering with community organizations to share resources and reach new audiences. The Showcase of Ideas offers 23 informal presentations, including creating a family guide on a budget; reaching the social networking generation; and involving docents as mentors in training programs.

Other highlights include:

- Pre-symposium tours of private collections, St. Louis history and architecture, Cahokia Mounds, the Saint Louis Zoo, Missouri Botanical Garden, and Laumeier Sculpture Park
- Opening dinner at the World’s Fair Pavilion in Forest Park, with an after-hours visit to the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Monet’s Water Lilies exhibition
- Post-symposium tour to the Gateway Arch and Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and local museums and historic sites.

IMLS Wants Your Feedback

The Institute of Museum and Library Services wants your thoughts on how the agency can do its job best. As part of its strategic planning process, IMLS is seeking input that will guide an examination of grant programs, research, and leadership initiatives. For AAMV members, this process is an opportunity to make sure that volunteer issues are part of the conversation. Propose ideas for discussion and voting here: http://imls.ideascale.com.

Dispatches from the Future of Museums

AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums publishes a fascinating weekly digest of “curated clippings” on cultural and social trends, tools and technology, and museum innovation. Dispatches from the Future of Museums is a great way to keep in touch with intriguing issues that affect everyone involved in museums. Among the most recent stories: MIT research findings on approaches to teaching young children; most important social media trends for 2010; museum mergers and partnerships as a response to the economic downturn; and the Detroit Institute of Arts’ Inside/Out initiative, a novel experiment with installing life-size reproductions of famous paintings outdoors in Michigan cities. To subscribe via RSS feed or e-mail, go to: www.futureofmuseums.org/reading/dispatches.cfm.
Envisioning a Place for Volunteers

By rethinking its volunteer model and changing internal culture, the Austin Children’s Museum has made the volunteer experience beneficial to the organization, its volunteers, and ultimately its visitors. This excerpt from Strategic Volunteer Engagement: A Guide for Nonprofit and Public Sector Leaders explains how.

During a perfect storm of organizational crises at the Austin Children’s Museum, Mike Nellis stepped into the role of executive director. Not only did the organization face the impending loss of its lease and the need for a new capital campaign and building, it also struggled with internal strife at various levels, from a board of directors in transition, to a confrontation-prone staff, to a disengaged pool of volunteers. Much about the organization felt adrift, with hardly any room for volunteers in an organization that, at the time, had no home of its own.

After conducting an organizational assessment amid these challenges, identifying strategies for moving forward, and starting anew in a central downtown location, Nellis and the Children’s Museum made a call he has never regretted: to pay much more attention to the place of volunteers in advancing the organization’s goals.

In years past, volunteer coordination had fallen under the umbrella of the museum’s fund development department, with the thinking that perhaps volunteers’ key function lay in their capacity as committed, potential donors. This tactic, Nellis wryly notes, “didn’t work very well.” He adds, “Previously, the Children’s Museum had an internal culture of believing volunteers were meant to be cultivated as donors and, otherwise, were sometimes more pain than they’re worth.”

Nellis set about changing that culture: by having the volunteer coordinator directly report to him, by asking high-level staff to model productive relations with interns and other volunteers, and by pursuing a grant to allow the Children’s Museum to benchmark a sophisticated volunteer-engagement program in another city. “I saw huge potential to use volunteers to improve quality of service,” Nellis says. “Now instead of offering just feel-good opportunities, we have folks working in a way that’s mutually beneficial to our organization and to the volunteer.”

The organization’s new system for volunteer engagement, based on a model originated at the New York Hall of Science, creates lifelong opportunities for connection to the museum’s work: as young user, “junior volunteer” (elementary-aged museum-camp attendant), counselor-in-training (high-school camp leader), college student, and professional industry expert. This “science career ladder” for volunteers mirrors the opportunities for professional development, training, networking, and advancement the Austin Children’s Museum makes available to its own staff.

“The goal,” Nellis explains, “is to create a seamless integration between paid and unpaid workers. At the front end, this takes a lot of work—a lot of training, education, checking in, and making sure volunteers are having a great experience. But the value is that volunteers’ contributions are able to match that of staff on the floor. We’re serious about the work we do, and we want our volunteers to be serious, too.”

Participants in the science career ladder join a complement of back-office volunteers who assist with administrative components of the museum’s work, creating a “bifurcation between volunteers who work directly with kids and those who don’t.” As a result, volunteers now have a defined place in the museum’s operations and are identified as key players on the agency’s organizational chart. “We use volunteers as extensions of our staff,” Nellis says. “We’ve found, if we can enhance the meaning of the experience for the volunteer, services to visitors are enhanced in the process.”

Tips & Techniques

Engaging Teen Volunteers continued from page 1

high-quality volunteer experience. The Science Career Ladder at the New York Hall of Science—a youth development and youth employment model adopted by museums all over the country—has always been integral to the museum’s mission. Teen Explainers are the museum’s public face, making the diverse audience feel welcome.

2. Understand who teens are.
Adolescents are exploring their identities, developing life skills, and seeking self-worth and a sense of belonging. Successful volunteer experiences use these developmental characteristics as a framework, not a barrier. Teen volunteers work with children in many museums, including the Minnesota Children’s Museum, where Youth Squad volunteers build confidence because young visitors look up to them as they would adults.

3. Set the bar high.
Expectations communicate respect and provide structure. When you provide standards and policies about visitor interaction, behavior, and appearance—as well as clear job descriptions—teens will take their roles seriously. In some museums, the regular volunteer handbook applies to teens, but others create policies and procedures tailored to teens. The High Desert Museum’s appearance and behavior standards address issues that come up with adolescents, such as cell phone use and covering tattoos.

4. Give them a voice.
Contrary to stereotype, teens want responsibility. Be willing to share control and let teens lead. Appreciate their fresh insights, be encouraging, and take them seriously. Invite them in developing their own activities and contributions. Some museums form youth groups that work with staff on a range of tasks, including recruiting, planning activities, and providing a leadership voice for teen volunteers (see below).

Engagement in Action: Youth@Bruce

A dynamic student group at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, CT, takes the teen volunteer experience to a higher level of engagement. With an impressive list of accomplishments and its own website, Youth@Bruce has a visible presence in the museum and among high school students in the community.

Youth@Bruce is grounded in the notion that a participatory culture enhances volunteer and education programs for young people. The group developed iCreate, a juried teen art exhibition that has become part of the museum’s annual exhibition schedule, and raised more than $3,000 online using Kickstarter.com to fund a traveling exhibition, Arctic Sanctuary: Images of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The live webcast of a TEDxYouth@Bruce event held in conjunction with Arctic Sanctuary generated a following of more than 5,000 people worldwide. Youth@Bruce also participates in ASTC’s Youth Inspired Challenge, a national initiative stimulated by education reform efforts in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Established in 2009, Youth@Bruce has about 12 members chosen by application and interview from the museum’s 150 youth volunteers. Overall, these volunteers, ages 14 to 22, contribute more than 5,000 hours a year to family days, festivals, special events, office support, and Youth@Bruce.

Volunteer program manager Mary Ann Lendenmann describes the difference that engaged teen volunteers make: “Studies have shown that teenagers are among the most underrepresented audiences in museums. While many may attend the occasional enforced school field trip, they typically do not choose museums as a place to visit on their own. This is no longer the case here. Our offices and galleries are teeming with energy from our regional high school and college students who have become part of the museum’s culture. All staff members—reception, security, various departments, as well as the museum director—embrace our youth volunteers.”

To learn more: Youth@Bruce website—www.youthbruce.com; Kickstarter fundraising page—www.kickstarter.com/projects/youthatbruce; Youth Inspired Challenge—www.youthinspired.org

continued on page 7
6. Involve parents and guardians.

Their support contributes to their children’s success. Build a positive relationship from the start. Consider holding a parent orientation, explain to parents what’s expected of teen volunteers, and keep them informed. The National Constitution Center welcomes every volunteer’s parents with a letter that contains basic details.

7. Offer interesting activities.

Begin with youth-friendly, interactive training that avoids the classroom approach. Teen docents at the Danforth Museum in Framingham, MA, have intensive training before they begin leading youth tours. One high school art teacher made this comparison: “Just like you have varsity-level sports, this is varsity-level art.” Avoid giving teens tasks that no one else wants to do. Help them use their skills, but also guide them in learning new ones and building self-confidence.

Finding common ground with your teen volunteers involves letting go of stereotypes and concentrating on their assets. When there is just token involvement, you keep them interested enough to show up on time and do their jobs. With deeper engagement, you develop respectful relationships that benefit the museum, provide personal growth opportunities for the volunteer, and may help create a generation of avid museum-goers who are eager to volunteer as adults.
What is AAMV?

There are more than one million volunteers and volunteer program managers in all categories of museums in the United States. Founded in 1979, the American Association for Museum Volunteers (AAMV) is America’s only national association dedicated to the paid and unpaid museum staff who work together. AAMV is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

Who are AAMV Members?

We are volunteers, docents, and paid museum staff who bring a wealth of experience and ideas in promoting volunteerism in museums and in starting or improving museum volunteer programs. We welcome members from zoos and aquariums, botanical gardens, historic houses, and other cultural organizations with an educational mission.

What does AAMV do?

- Promotes professional standards of volunteerism
- Provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and information
- Offers opportunities for continuing education through panel discussion and workshops at local, regional and national conferences
- Encourages volunteers and volunteer managers to become familiar with project and programs both locally and nationally
- Informs and supports museums and volunteerism in advocacy for legislation at local and national levels
- Accomplishes these goals in cooperation with museum directors, staff and boards of trustees

Membership Benefits …

- Participation in a vibrant Members-Only listserv
- Quarterly newsletter
- Access to information to create and sustain a museum volunteer program
- Opportunities to take part in workshops and presentations at state, regional, and national meetings
- Access to state and regional representatives as well as a nationwide network of volunteer management professionals and experienced volunteers
- Advance notice of AAMV publications, such as Transforming Museum Volunteering, plus workshops, presentations, and meetings

Become an AAMV Member Today!

Name ____________________________ Institutional Affiliation ____________________________ Date __________

Mailing Address ____________________________

Phone ____________________________ Fax ____________________________ E-mail ____________________________

Volunteer □ Staff □ Title (if staff) ____________________________ Department ____________________________

Check here if you would like to be added to the listserv □

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

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Make checks payable to AAMV. (Membership by PayPal is available online at www.aamv.org)

If you have any questions about your membership send an email to Carly Shaw at cshaw@nbm.org.

*Allows 3 individuals from same institution access to AAMV listserv

**Individual membership plus $65 deductible contribution

Send membership applications to: AAMV, P. O. Box 9494, Washington, DC 20016