AAMV Issues Standards and Best Practices for Museum Volunteer Programs

by Lois Kuter
President, AAMV
Volunteer Coordinator, Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University

As the national organization for volunteer program managers and volunteers and docents in museums, AAMV often receives inquiries from staff seeking information about benchmarks and standard practice for good volunteer programs. We’re fortunate that our publication—Transforming Museum Volunteering: A Practical Guide for Engaging 21st-Century Volunteers, published in 2007—is a great reference for setting up, maintaining, and improving a museum volunteer program. We’re still felt the call for a set of standards that museums could use to evaluate the quality of their programs. We were greatly encouraged by the American Association of Museums, which recommends that its affiliate organizations develop such documents to complement AAM’s own standards for excellence.

Given the vast diversity of museums and the roles volunteers play in them, drafting “standards” was a daunting task. But AAMV is certainly best able to create such a document because we can pool the considerable wisdom of our members. “Standards and Best Practices for Museum Volunteer Programs” was developed over the last year and is now available in the Resources section of the AAMV website, www.aamv.org. (AAM will also link to the AAMV statement from its online information center so that the wider museum world will have access.) We consider these standards and best practices a work in progress to be reviewed and improved over time.

The first draft was prepared by a college intern working with me at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University in Philadelphia. She used Transforming Museum Volunteering as the basic outline, and I worked with her to come up with a document that the AAMV board reviewed and improved last fall. We presented the revised version at the AAM Annual Meeting in Minneapolis this past spring in an Idea Lounge where a dozen or so museum staff from around the country had further ideas to contribute.

“Standards and Best Practices for Museum Volunteer Programs” as proposed by AAMV begins with 13 basic statements. Each statement is then elaborated upon in a list of best practices. Here are the main points:

1. The institution ensures that the volunteer program has staff support and resources needed for its success.
2. Museum staff identify volunteer roles that serve the institution.
3. Recruiting is done in a fair manner so that information about volunteer opportunities is accessible.
4. Filling volunteer positions is done in a fair manner that ensures the best match for the job.
5. All volunteers receive an orientation to the museum.
6. All volunteers receive training that prepares them to perform their work to the best of their abilities.

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AAMV Standards continued from page 1

7. Communication between staff and volunteers is effective and frequent.
8. Supervision from museum staff helps volunteers to continue to learn and improve job performance while offering them the opportunity to give feedback and contribute ideas.
9. Evaluation of and by volunteers is performed. Volunteers are evaluated for the quality of work they perform, and volunteers have the opportunity to evaluate the volunteer program.
10. Evaluation of and by staff is performed. Staff supervisors’ skills in working with volunteers are evaluated, and staff have the opportunity to evaluate the volunteer program.
11. Volunteers are recognized and rewarded for their work (commitment of time, quality/quantity of work, etc.).
12. Accurate records are kept to show the scope and breadth of the volunteer involvement in the life of the institution.
13. Risk management is in place.

We tried to identify elements that were important in building the best possible museum volunteer program and to organize them in a logical way. We hope that the practices outlined will help volunteer program managers and volunteers examine their practices to confirm that they are providing the elements we feel contribute to a quality program and to determine where there are weaknesses they need to address. Obviously, the way a museum meets standards can vary and must be adapted to the reality of budgets and staff resources. Small museums, for example, are unlikely to have a full-time volunteer program manager, but they should have staff who are responsible for supporting volunteers with some time and resources. Certainly, in drafting the standards I became aware of the areas where my own museum has some gaps to fill.

AAMV proposes these “Standards and Best Practices for Museum Volunteer Programs” as a helpful tool for museums to evaluate how they engage volunteers in their work. They are purposely open-ended, yet they provide clear guideposts for excellence. We would very much welcome your feedback and suggestions.

To comment on the new AAMV standards, contact Lois Kuter, kuter@ansp.org, or post your thoughts on the AAMV members’ listserv. To join the listserv, contact Steve Dugan, s.dugan@homesteadmuseum.org.
Did You Miss AAM?

Rethinking Volunteer Motivation
Anne Schink invites volunteer managers to reconsider the traditional notion that external rewards—“the carrot and the stick”—are the best motivators and focus instead on internal factors that bring personal satisfaction. Inspired by Daniel Pink’s new book Drive, she explains in a guest post for VolunteerMaine’s blog that “people who are internally driven to succeed are significantly more effective in the long run than those who are motivated by some carrot or stick.”

Millennial Impact Report 2012
This annual research study looks at 20- to 35-year-olds’ preferences for connecting with, getting involved with, and giving to nonprofits. Some highlights related to involvement:
• 63 percent volunteered in 2011.
• 41 percent plan to volunteer more in 2012.
• 81 percent prefer to learn about volunteering opportunities through their peers.
• 58 percent prefer a short-term volunteer commitment.
• 77 percent are interested in leadership involvement, but only 20 percent are already on a board.

The Volunteer Shelf Life
http://bit.ly/MmhwuA
Just like paid staff, volunteers have diverse motivations for volunteering—and for deciding to leave. In this e-book (subtitled A No-Fault Look at Volunteer Retention and the Reasons Volunteers Leave), volunteer manager Meridian Swift explores the challenges of volunteer retention and takes the practical view that despite volunteer managers’ best efforts, today’s volunteers may not stay forever.

The Power of Choice: Let the Volunteer Lead the Way
http://bit.ly/LpbLX4
In the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum’s volunteer placement model, volunteers choose and apply for open positions. Arika Quick, manager of volunteer services, writes in a guest post for the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration’s blog that this system “often translates into a more fulfilling, rewarding, and gratifying placement and subsequent experience for the volunteer and the organization.”

AASLH Small Museums Online Community
Volunteers, staff, and board members in small museums are invited to join this new online community from the American Association for State and Local History’s Small Museums Committee. It features a discussion forum, a resource library, and networking opportunities.

Calendar

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<th>Western Museums Association (WMA)</th>
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<td>September 8–13, Phoenix, AZ</td>
<td>October 21–24, Palm Springs, CA</td>
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<td>November 7–9, Burlington, VT</td>
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<td>September 8–13, Phoenix, AZ</td>
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How to Create a Successful Internship Program

by Mary Anne Schierman
Director of Volunteers and Interns,
McLean County Museum of History,
Bloomington, IL

Student internships are a great way for people interested in the museum field to have their first professional experiences. Internships can also make it possible for museums and historical societies to complete special or dream projects. Bringing students and projects together to make the right match takes some work. With a solid plan, careful recruitment and placement, and a structured, rewarding on-the-job experience, you can create a program that benefits both the intern and the organization.

Develop a Plan
A successful internship experience requires staff buy-in and training. Staff preparation should include a discussion of terms, including training, mentoring, and teaching, and a review of the organization’s mission and operations. The internship site needs a coordinator/facilitator, and the staff member who supervises interns (sometimes the same person) should have the ability to mentor, listen, and train. The coordinator should also identify a dedicated workspace, computer, and office supplies for the intern.

An internship project needs a beginning, middle, and end and should fit within a semester’s timeframe. Design work that is academically responsible (not routine photocopying or envelope stuffing) and fulfills a real, mission-related need in your organization. Internships do not displace the work of regular employees; they are considered the work of a learner/trainee under the close observation of a regular employee or supervisor.

During the project development stage, building a solid partnership with the higher learning institution will ensure that expectations from the faculty, student, and museum sides will be met. The student’s academic advisor should communicate the conditions of a satisfactory experience. A three-way written contract is a good way to detail the terms of the internship from the perspective of each partner.

Once the staff is trained and prepared, the internship coordinator facilitates the development of the internship project or position with the staff supervisor. Whether you have one project or many, write a position description that includes:

• A clear title reflecting the nature of the job
• A detailed project description
• A list of skills to be used and developed
• Academic requirements
• Physical requirements
• Educational requirements (number of hours needed for completion)
• The organization’s contact information

A complete job description sets the tone for the initial contact between the student and your organization. Having application and application procedures in place saves time once the candidate search begins. The application can be a link on your website. Make sure the application document lists all requirements for the application process.

An internship program manual is essential. It puts into writing the important elements of the program and facts about your organization. Each candidate should receive a copy of the manual during the interview and review it with the supervisor to answer any questions that arise. Include the following sections in the manual:

• Welcome letter from the museum director or internship coordinator
• Museum mission statement
• Intern (general) job description
• Policies and procedures
  • Organization/intern agreement
  • Benefits
  • Schedule, attendance requirements, and dress code
  • Arrival procedures
  • General Information (phone, membership, security, etc.)
  • Emergency information
  • History of your organization and its community
  • Building layout
  • Organizational chart
    • Staff titles and jobs
    • Board of directors
  • List of internship requirements (extra readings, final paper, etc.)
  • Evaluation schedule

The final step before advertising the position is determining the evaluation process for the intern and the internship program. Often the student’s academic advisor has midterm and final evaluation forms and procedures; if not, construct your own evaluation tool. In addition, the student should be given the opportunity to evaluate your organization’s program.

Each student working in your organization should have a file that contains:

• A resumé and cover letter
• Letters of recommendation
• Copies of midterm and final evaluations (by supervisor)
• Photo
• Written description (by student) of their project
• Program evaluation (by student)

By creating and keeping a file on each intern, you are following consistent HR procedures and practices.

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Recruit, Interview, and Place Interns

You are now ready to advertise the internship position. Everything is in place for the successful communication of your mission, projects, application requirements, and program policies.

Familiarize yourself with local institutions of higher learning. Get the word out to your board members, volunteers, and community on your internship opportunities. Circulate the information through your Facebook page, website, and/or organization newsletter. You might not have a college or university in your community, but you may have college-age students home for break.

Soon your groundwork will pay off, as students contact you with their questions and shower you with their energy and enthusiasm. After the application paperwork is received, schedule an interview for the student. Remember that this is often the student’s first professional application process and interview experience. Make sure you are prepared.

The interview is a key to the success of the experience for staff and student. Knowledge of your organization, the project, and the applicant will help you make the right match. During the interview, give the student a complete building tour, including a view of the workspace. Introduce him or her to staff. Describe the internship project, and schedule a question-and-answer session with the staff supervisor.

Offer a Rewarding, Productive Work Experience

The student’s first day of work includes a review of the project and internship requirements, answering any remaining questions, and an introduction to artifact handling if that is part of the project. Getting to know staff is an important aspect of the learning experience. At the McLean County Museum of History, we require each intern to interview all staff members. These interviews are completed within the first three weeks of the internship. They give the student the opportunity early on to have one-on-one contact with each museum professional to ask about their jobs, interests, and past education. Staff are encouraged to share a time when they were mentored in their careers.

Once the intern is on the job, the staff’s role includes:
- Compliment and reinforce professional behavior, appearance, and performance.
- Share professional journals, magazines, and articles with the intern.
- Discuss the student’s career plans and provide information on graduate museum studies programs.
- Review the student’s weekly journal entries; answer questions; clarify responsibilities and procedures.
- Complete midterm and final evaluations, and review them with the student.

At the end of the semester, it is important to sit down with the student and review the internship. Was the experience a positive one? What did he/she learn? What part of museum work was most enjoyable? What are his/her future plans? Did your organization fulfill your end of the partnership? What improvements does the intern think you could make to your program?

The intern’s answers to these questions will give you a good perspective on your program and on the staff supervisors. Students who have a good experience will advertise your organization to others. You will form a win-win partnership. You will be accomplishing projects on your wish list, and students will be learning about the museum field. A new group of professionals will be on their way to join this amazing profession.

We get very attached to our students. The semester passes quickly, and we hate to see them go. If they have a good experience and are able, many of them come back the following semester to volunteer. Student interns bring your museum energy, enthusiasm, and new perspectives. Enjoy them!

The McLean County Museum of History is willing to share the manuals they developed with others who would like to adapt them to their needs. Contact the author, mschierman@mchistory.org.

Resources


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 Lois Kuter at kuter@ansp.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