

Volunteer Fair and Retreat

by Claire Dixon, Bonner Scholars Coordinator

Purpose

- The fair advertises service opportunities and the retreat orients students to their new volunteer positions.
- Allows community organizations to recruit committed volunteers for the upcoming year by sponsoring a booth that displays pictures and provides information, with sign-up sheets and knowledgeable staff to answer questions.
- Allows student organizers to develop leadership skills and work with community agencies.

Background

The Volunteer Fair

Before the fair, Guilford Bonners used the Volunteer Center of Greensboro, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to match volunteers with community needs. However, many people felt that bringing agencies to campus would more dramatically and accurately illustrate their mission and assist students in choosing their service placements. The creation of the Volunteer Fair in 1994 also helped other interested students find nonprofit internship and volunteer opportunities, and it increased the visibility of community agencies as well as community learning on campus.

The Volunteer Retreat

Guilford wants to ensure that student volunteers are well-trained, knowledgeable, and genuinely helpful to the community. A grass-roots community organizer, Irving Brisbon, consulted with the College's Community Learning department about ways to train volunteers, specifically in the areas of diversity and racial justice. The volunteer retreat was originally a training retreat for Guilford Bonner Scholars, but the College now strongly encourages all Guilford volunteers to attend.

How It Works

The Volunteer Fair

The fair is held in a large auditorium on campus for several hours on a weekday afternoon shortly after the beginning of the fall semester. Students are encouraged to attend the fair to "shop" for a site volunteer, an internship, or just to learn about opportunities available in the community. Each year the fair has a theme, such as "Bursting the Guilford Bubble" or "Tropical Get-Away."

The Volunteer Retreat

Those students who make a commitment to one or more of Guilford's committed sites (community agencies where Guilford students are involved on a weekly basis) are required to attend the appropriate training sessions at the subsequent retreat. The project coordinator of each site notifies the students of this requirement when they sign up and reminds them via phone and mail to ensure their participation. The retreat usually takes place on a Saturday from late morning to early evening, and a lunch is provided.

Retreat Agenda

The day includes multiple concurrent training sessions, motivational speakers, and a final opportunity for sharing and centering. The first round of training sessions are generally student-led and focus directly on each of Guilford's committed sites. Led by the student coordinator and other experienced volunteers, these sessions elaborate on Guilford's history of involvement at the particular site, what volunteers should expect, and strategies for contributing successfully.

The next round of concurrent training sessions is broader in scope. Titles have included "Leading Activities with Children," "Cross-Cultural Skills," and "International Service Work." Most of these

sessions are led by staff, faculty members, and community members, although some are student-led. The retreat usually concludes with a motivational speaker, followed by a sharing of experiences by participants.

Goals

The main objective of the retreat is to educate volunteers about how to cope with common situations. The retreat is also an opportunity to discuss the local history and the social problems underlying the issues that volunteer service addresses. The goal is to send knowledgeable and effective volunteers into the community. The retreat also brings Bonner and other student volunteers together to generate campus-wide excitement about community learning.

What Makes The Project Unique

All Bonners and almost all first-year students are required to attend the Volunteer Fair because First-year Experience courses require attendance. Those students who make a commitment to one or more of Guilford's committed sites must attend the appropriate training sessions at the subsequent retreat. Because the retreat immediately follows the fair, students are prepared to enter their service sites. The retreat creates a space for sharing and bonding with other volunteers and illustrates the connection between academics and service leadership, thereby fostering a campus wide ethic of service.

Benefits

Community agencies have a chance to meet, train, and recruit potential volunteers directly at little cost.

Professors who have a service component in their courses have a ready-made array of choices available to their students.

For Community Learning administrators, the events consolidate resources for placing students in appropriate agencies and for training volunteers in a consistent fashion.

Timeline

June

Project Community's (PC) two summer student staff members begin planning for the Volunteer Fair by reviewing the list of organizations that participated the year before and brainstorming about other nonprofit organizations to invite. They send out letters informing all the groups of the new date and the details of the event.

July

Students confirm the list of organizations planning to attend the fair. They begin soliciting donations and drawing up an agenda for the retreat with the help of the Community Learning staff. They design evaluation forms for both events and plans for an advertising campaign on campus.

August

New PC workers are hired and trained. PC's first project is to firm up plans and staff the fair and retreat. Directional signs for community members are posted the day of the fair, and widespread advertising on campus allows students, staff, and faculty to know about both events. Speakers for the retreat are confirmed. PC workers staff registration tables at both events and help coordinate the setup and troubleshoot for any problems.

Resources And Partners

The Bonner Foundation

- Project Community was initiated by Bonner Scholars at an Summer Leadership Institute conference. The Foundation provides funding for staff, students, and trainings in the area of community learning at Guilford.

Community Agencies

- Representatives from nonprofit organizations throughout the community staff booths at the fair.
- Agency staff members are frequent speakers at the retreat and often make presentations at training sessions. They also serve as guides and supervisors for many Guilford student volunteers in the year and attend other campus events sponsored by PC.

Faculty and Staff

- Many Guilford faculty members make attendance a requirement for all first-year students.
- Staff and faculty members frequently participate and make presentations at the retreat, training events and discussions held throughout the year.

Community Learning Staff

- The three-person staff helps to organize and plan both events, overseeing student workers and volunteers. Staff members routinely make presentations at the retreat.

Project Community Staff

- Student workers help to organize the fair and retreat by contacting community agencies, advertising the events on campus, and staffing registration tables. In order to provide lunch at the retreat, student workers from Project Community solicit donations and price reductions from local businesses and restaurants, as well as from Guilford's cafeteria.

Overcoming Challenges

Attendance at on-campus events is a challenge at Guilford because there are always many activities taking place. The Volunteer Fair introduces all students to the concept of volunteering and to the opportunities available in the Greensboro area. Therefore, high attendance is essential to the fair's mission. In order to increase student participation, the Community Learning staff work with the faculty to make attendance at the fair mandatory for all first-year students. This was accomplished by incorporating the fair into the syllabi of all First-Year Experience courses, one of which each first-year student is required to take. By tying the fair to academic courses, professors communicate the importance of community learning as a part of the Guilford experience.

Evidence of Success

Community agencies have begun calling Guilford to request a spot, often well in advance of the date. This shows that the fair has improved the community's opinion of Guilford's volunteers in addition to increasing the number of students who participate in community service.

To illustrate the growing success of both programs:

- In 2000, 97 students attended. In 2002, 125 students attended.
- Of the 125 students who attended the 2002 fair, 65 went on to attend the retreat. In other words, half of the students who came to the fair were inspired to make a commitment to a service site.
- The vast majority of students who attend the retreat honor their volunteer commitments, at least through one semester.

How to Make it Grow

By developing further partnerships with professors who have service requirements in their courses and increasing the number of such courses, the College can integrate service and academics and make an ethic of community learning part of their campus's culture.