
ENGAGING YOUTH IN DECISION-MAKING: MOVING FROM VOLUNTEERISM TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Ilona Dougherty, *Apathy is Boring*

INTRODUCTION: IT'S NOT ACTUALLY ABOUT "VOLUNTEERING" AT ALL

I spent a part of my childhood in the back of a soup kitchen, quite literally. My parents started two soup kitchens when I was growing up, and I remember sitting with my brother, looking at all the cakes in the freezer and wishing we could eat them all. It was not unusual for my brother and I to help out. We would collect dishes, help serve, or talk with the various patrons. I don't ever remember thinking that this was an unusual way to grow up.

I also don't remember thinking of our time there as work. It was just something that needed to be done for our community, so we did it. My parents are both socially engaged citizens and dedicated volunteers whom I greatly admire. Despite their community engagement, I rarely heard the word "volunteering" growing up, nor was it something that I related to. I assumed that the way my family interacted with our community was typical and expected of everyone. We all get so much from the communities that surround us, so it made sense to me that you would give something back.

Since then, I have continued to feel disconnected from the word "volunteering." Whether it was managing a punk band in high school, protesting various global institutions, collaborating with artists for a community production, or sitting on a board of directors, I felt that I was just using my talents to make a contribution. If there was a need – be it artistic, human, or otherwise – I took the necessary steps to fill it.

My pragmatic approach to community engagement has not always been good for my back account – or for my parents' bank account, for that matter. I am now paid to run Apathy is Boring, but for the first two years I was very much an unpaid volunteer. I worked anywhere from 30 to 90 hours a week and managed to scrape by thanks to small contracts and the support of friends and family. Once again, I didn't see myself as a volunteer. There was a problem that needed to be fixed, in this case the lack of youth engagement in the democratic process, and I did what I could to address it. I always knew that I had the unwavering support of my family and community.

Although my story may be very different from the experiences of many of the young people we work with at Apathy is Boring (not everyone can or should dedicate two years to being a full time volunteer), there is a lesson there. Having spent the last seven years running an organization dedicated to encouraging youth to become more engaged in

ILONA DOUGHERTY is the co-founder and Executive Director of Apathy is Boring (www.apathyisboring.com), a national non-partisan charitable organization that uses art and technology to educate Canadian youth about democracy, giving them the tools they need to get involved in their communities.
Email: ilona@apathyisboring.com

their communities, I have found that most youth have a similar relationship to community engagement and to the traditional concept of volunteering as I do.

For the youth we work with, getting involved is not a matter of being more charitable or generous. It is more urgent and more meaningful. Young people want to be active citizens. When they take action, it is because they recognize and act on their responsibilities as members of a community. They see what their community gives them, be it inspiration or a helping hand, and want to contribute something in return.

THE PROBLEM: WE NEED “VOLUNTEERS” NOW MORE THAN EVER

Through my work at Apathy is Boring, I hear the same problem expressed over and over by the nonprofits, charities, and organizations we support in reaching youth through our Youth Friendly Programming: “We’re trying to reach out to youth, but we just can’t seem to get them to pay attention. It ends up being the same few volunteers who do all the work.” The organizations that we work with consistently need more help from volunteers and consistently don’t know where to find them.

This is not just an anecdote: the numbers show that older volunteers tend to contribute more of their time than any other group. Unfortunately, these older volunteers are aging out of the active volunteer pool and will continue to do so. Organizations are beginning to report shortages of volunteers, which are exacerbating the existing recruitment and retention challenges in the sector (Volunteer Canada in partnership with Manulife Financial, 2010).

The problem is clear, but the question remains: how should we address this shortage? One obvious answer is to attract more young volunteers, but it seems this is easier said than done. The challenge here is how to do so. Unfortunately, it is clear that the majority of the nonprofit sector has not really figured out how to effectively reach youth and engage them in meaningful volunteer work.

Perhaps the best-known attempt to address this problem is the introduction of service programs in high schools, sometimes dubbed “mandatory volunteerism.” These programs do increase volunteering rates among students, but the effects are short-lived. By the time they hit their mid-twenties, youth who participated in mandatory programs are no more likely to volunteer than their peers who did not (Planty, Bozick, & Regnier, 2006).

Why are youth less likely to volunteer? One key factor is that most people go through major life transitions during their early twenties that disconnect them from their existing communities. In a survey of Canadians aged 15-39, the market research firm Decode found that volunteering rates drop rapidly after leaving high school. So-called “young independents” and young couples – those who have moved away from home – volunteer at roughly half the rate of high-school students (Barnard, 2009). These youth do eventually re-engage, but only after settling down, starting families, and rebuilding those community ties. Findings from the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating show the same basic phenomenon (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009).

What we can summarize from all this is that we are good at engaging students (i.e., youth in a confined and predictable environment) in the short-term. Where we fall short

is fostering long-term commitment and engagement. We are failing to engage youth whose lives are no longer anchored in their schools or their family homes.

We have a growing problem: the lack of volunteers. We have a potential solution: youth. Unfortunately, we also have a sector that for the most part has not yet learned how to tap into this enormous resource.

THE CHALLENGE: YOUTH EXPECT MORE AND HAVE MORE TO GIVE

To be frank, I was a difficult volunteer to work with in my teens and early twenties. I was ambitious and had high expectations: I wanted to quickly move up from volunteer babysitting at a conference to sitting on a steering committee. I was also lucky, because one of the first organizations I volunteered with (the Northern Environmental Network) saw my leadership potential at the ripe old age of 14 and offered me that very opportunity.

It wasn't easy for them. There was a lot I needed to learn, but I was blessed with mentors within the organization who saw my potential and were willing to support me and involve me in the work they were doing from day one.

Apathy is Boring grew out of that mentorship, the philosophy that I saw in practice there and in other organizations I have volunteered for in the last 15 years, including the Sierra Club and Sierra Youth Coalition. At Apathy is Boring, we provide multiple venues for our volunteers to become more integrated into the organizational culture. We not only offer a variety of volunteer opportunities for youth ranging from attending concerts to helping to write and translate documents in the office, but we also offer paid internships. Several of our volunteers have gone on to become staff and board members. Our volunteers are a key part of the Apathy is Boring "family" and we invest time and effort into indentifying and fostering their leadership potential.

This approach requires the striking of a fine balance. Apathy is Boring's strategy is based on providing low-risk "entry points" for youth and then helping them move into deeper forms of involvement (Clarke & Dougherty, 2010). Our first contact with someone may be a simple website visit or having them fill out a survey. Previously unengaged youth can easily get overwhelmed or simply tune out organizations that seem "preachy." At the same time, they won't form attachments to an organization if they see that youth are only given token opportunities for involvement, while others make the "real" decisions.

We have found that the sense of community and the opportunities we offer help our volunteers stick around, sometimes to an astonishing degree. We recently had a volunteer attend one of our events even though his wife was later that day going to the hospital to give birth. He said he just had to be there. Moments like these make it amazingly clear to me how powerful a meaningful volunteer experience can be for the person so engaged.

CONCLUSION: READING THIS ARTICLE IS NOT ENOUGH

If as a sector we want to address the shortage of volunteers by engaging the new generation, we need to offer more than a token "charitable task" to these young volunteers. They expect more, and we need to provide it. The sector needs to offer these youth a meaningful opportunity for engagement so that they feel in control of the work they are doing and have a sense of impact, meaning, and community.

If we give young people this chance and offer them opportunities to be truly engaged in our work, they will not disappoint.

So where do we start? Well, study after study after study (Office of Research and Policy Development, 2009; Corporation for National & Community Service, 2009; Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Volunteer Canada in partnership with Manulife Financial, 2010) has found that direct, in-person requests to fill specific volunteer positions is the single most successful recruitment strategy. Forty-five percent of youth, more than any other age group, report never having experienced this kind of contact (Volunteer Canada in partnership with Manulife Financial, 2010).

We can start with reaching out to the youth we know and asking them what kinds of opportunities attract and inspire them. We also need to be more open to the needs of youth by really listening to what they are telling us about the barriers to engagement they face.

As part of that process, we need to re-evaluate our attitudes about youth. There is a societal tendency to view youth as facetious, even irresponsible. A few years ago researchers assembled six focus groups of adults and presented them with some news articles. Many of these articles included positive statistics about the views, aspirations, and habits of young people. When asked to evaluate the plausibility of the claims, adults in all six focus groups unanimously dismissed the positive statistics as false—even when the researchers informed them that the statistics were in fact true (Gilliam & Bales, 2001)!

Overcoming these stereotypes and reaching out to unengaged youth is not easy. It requires a serious commitment from organizations to reflect on and change their internal culture and policies and to have those changes be reflected in the ways in which they choose to reach out to youth. Every day, Apathy is Boring works with charities and NGOs to help them do precisely that, and I have seen the challenges first-hand.

However, if we can listen to the needs of young people and offer them real opportunities to contribute, we will be doing more than addressing the shortage of volunteers. We will also be making a dent in an even bigger problem: the lack of youth engagement in the democratic sphere. And by solving that problem, we, hand in hand with youth, will be well on our way to addressing the needs of our communities.

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