

EXPANDING PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE: RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS AND INTERNS



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Volunteers and interns can be valuable assets to any organization, especially nonprofit exchange organizations and education abroad offices. Volunteers add their diverse experiences, skills and knowledge to international programs. Because they have a wide range of reasons for giving their time and can represent a diverse cross-section of the community, they add a unique dimension to the workplace. International programs' volunteer staff may include students, members of service organizations, seniors and other community members.

As volunteers and interns, people with disabilities may provide additional benefits to international programs, such as:

- Enhancing staff resources
- Diversifying the work force
- Forging ties with local disability organizations
- Learning about accommodations and other disability issues
- Assisting with finding accessible homestays for inbound participants through contacts with disability organizations

In return, through internships and volunteer opportunities, international exchange organizations provide an important source of experience and a stepping stone to employment in the international field for people with disabilities.

RECRUITING

Many offices have existing procedures for recruiting volunteers and interns. These may include giving presentations at local schools or civic groups, posting information about volunteer and internship opportunities on websites or within the community and advertising in local newspapers or newsletters.

To assure a diverse pool of applicants for volunteer opportunities or internships, outreach to new sources is essential. New sources may in-

clude community-based disability organizations; disability services offices on college campuses; student groups such as minority student unions, disabled student unions, etc; independent living centers and community centers; and other public venues where people with disabilities meet or are represented. Student activities offices on college campuses can usually provide a list of organizations and venues where information about internships and volunteer openings is posted or distributed. Local telephone directories and local government agencies serving people with disabilities can help to identify other ways to conduct outreach to people with disabilities. For a list of national disability organizations that may be able to provide referral to local chapters, please see the **Resources** chapter in this manual.

Past program participants with disabilities may be an excellent resource for conducting outreach to people with disabilities. By describing their experiences abroad and the impact of international exchange on their lives, alumni can motivate people with and without disabilities to become involved in the international exchange field as participants, volunteers or interns. Alumni can also provide international exchange program staff with recommendations and strategies for recruiting interns and volunteers with disabilities locally.

To make sure that information is available to all potential volunteers and interns, materials describing openings and other information about the organization or office should be available in alternative formats upon request. This can be as simple as copying text files onto a disk or creating documents in a large print size. Materials in alternative formats will also be useful to individuals with disabilities who apply to exchange programs and to employees with disabilities.

Please see the **Providing Information in Alternative Formats** chapter in this manual for detailed instructions and resources on creating materials in alternative formats, and resources for ensuring that websites are accessible so that potential volunteers, interns and others are able to access information posted on the Internet. Exchange organizations can contact Watchfire (<http://bobby.watchfire.com>) for a free online assessment of the accessibility of any webpage, and for certification of a website as "Bobby Approved," if it meets accessibility standards. This service provides an analysis but does not make changes to a website to remove accessibility barriers.

ACCOMMODATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

In the United States, many good resources exist to assist with tips and guidelines for making workplaces accessible for people with all types of disabilities. Accessibility includes physical access, appropriate equipment to perform assigned tasks and workplace policies that are inclusive of people with disabilities. Examples of simple and low-cost workplace accommodations include:

- Rearranging a desk's layout or the position of office equipment to increase physical access for a person with a mobility disability.
- Purchasing a TTY to facilitate communication for people with speech, hearing or other disabilities.
- Adjusting policies to allow for breaks or a flexible schedule when required for disability-related reasons.

Although there may be high-tech or more costly means of making accommodations in a work environment, a volunteer or intern with a disability may have ideas for creative, low-cost options that work equally well. Please see the **Disability Information and Adaptations** and **Budgeting for Inclusion** chapters in this manual for more information on accommodations.

In order to encourage individuals to provide information regarding a disability and any accommodations they may require, organizations are advised to include a disability accommodations questionnaire in orientation packets provided to volunteers, interns, board members and staff who have already been approved for participation or employment. The Job Accommodations Network (JAN) operated by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy may be able to assist with developing such a form. JAN also provides free consultation on providing reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Please see the **Resources** chapter of this manual for information on other services that can be helpful in the accommodations process.



Christopher Michael Archie, a health, physical education and recreation major at Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU) in Itta Bena, Mississippi, loves public speaking. He used his skill and charisma to conduct outreach to other students with disabilities on campus through his internship at MVSU's Office of International Programs. "Through the internship I have been exposed to and participated in several interesting learning experiences," said Archie. He gained knowledge about disability rights in other coun-

tries and the field of study abroad. As a wheelchair user, he also worked with staff to consider access issues, which resulted in obtaining a ramp and an accessible bathroom in their office building on campus. Archie reflected, "The internship has better prepared me to enter the job force. I have learned the value of teamwork from a totally different perspective." "Additionally, the staff has been motivated to think longer and deeper about how we might reach out to other students with disabilities," explained Archie's intern supervisor and director of the program, Kathie Stromile. "I and other staff members learned that we could not diminish our expectations based solely on the fact that he has a physical disability." Impressed with his enthusiasm and hard work and appreciative of his disability perspective, the international office hired Archie to continue outreach to diverse student populations. "His sense of humor brought a certain levity to the office too," she adds.



BENEFITS

Organizations that include people with disabilities as volunteers and interns have an opportunity to develop a better understanding of accommodations issues, including the requirements and provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the entire office benefits from the expanded diversity, knowledge and experience gained by the inclusion of people with disabilities in the organization.

Accessibility improvements that are made to accommodate volunteers and interns also enhance the effective inclusion of participants with disabilities in the organization's programs. Furthermore, people with disabilities may be encouraged to apply to a program when they encounter staff, interns or volunteers with disabilities in the office, and may have greater confidence that the organization is committed to diversity and inclusion.

For people with disabilities who have not been overseas, a volunteer experience or internship can provide a valuable stepping stone to exploring international opportunities. If a volunteer has already been abroad, working with an international exchange organization upon return provides an opportunity to integrate the international experience into life after reentry and to continue the reflection and growth process. A volunteer's lessons learned abroad can also contribute to an evaluation of a program's process for including participants with disabilities. Finally, volunteer experiences and internships prepare people with disabilities to make valuable contributions as future staff members, directors, board members and participants in the international arena.



As a senior at Western Michigan University, **Allison LePage** interned with Colleagues International (CI), a National Council on International Visitors (NCIV) affiliate. LePage, who has a learning disability, reported, “After completing this internship, I have realized that the [international] academic and career path that I am [taking] will allow me to be very successful.” During her internship, she participated in many key aspects of bringing international visitors to her community. Additionally, she compiled a disability resource guide filled with contacts and tips to be used by NCIV affiliates, and business, government and community entities that receive international visitors with disabilities. “Working for an organization like CI that is well respected, both locally and at the governmental level, I’ve never run into situations where my disability is in the way. The staff understand what I need and they are really easy to work with.”

Jennifer Lang, LePage’s intern supervisor, commented, “Allison made great relationships with visitors and resources around Kalamazoo. Her office and computer knowledge have helped when we have been short-handed. And most importantly, she has taught everyone in our office, including myself and the board members, the importance of including people with disabilities in our international exchanges.” In fact, LaPage’s efforts paid off when CI hired her part-time to continue her project work.

