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**Digital Record Keeping for
Student Community Service;
Better Data, Better Reporting**

November, 2013
intelliVOL.com

Digital Record Keeping for Student Community Service; Better Data, Better Reporting

Community service used to be an overlooked program in U.S. high schools, often relegated to an administrative afterthought. And yet, surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that community service plays a significant role in student life at home and at school. During the past two major surveys, over 80% of high schools stated they required or recognized student community service to some degree.[1] This number has been fairly consistent since the 1990s when the NCES began surveying schools about community service.

In general, our society values community service. Most people agree that volunteering teaches valuable life skills and helps prepare our children for the adult world where they will have to hold down jobs and find their place as productive members of society. Colleges, too, value community service although how they measure and consider it on admissions applications varies as much as the college opportunities themselves. To better understand the effect of community service on admissions, in 2013 intelliVOL surveyed 73 district and high school leaders at a college readiness conference. Nearly every school leader who responded (99%, in fact) felt a student's participation in community service directly impacted college acceptance.[2] In that same survey, 80% of the college admissions counselors reported that student community service positively impacted acceptance rate.[3]

It would be a gargantuan task to review every college and university application to quantify the significance of community service on acceptance; however available data does confirm its widespread and substantive impact. Many college and university applications, including the University of California among others, specifically include a section for students to report their service hours and projects. And if not an overt portion of their application, essays reflecting a student's leadership skills and involvement in the community tend to be viewed more favorably than those without some indication of a student's interest beyond their immediate environment.

Community service and service learning allow students to build context… while honing 21st century skills such as teamwork and problem solving.

DoSomething.org surveyed 32 admissions officers from the U.S. News & World Reports' top 50 colleges and universities to determine how students gain an edge in the application process.[4] The 2011 survey raised no surprises; Counselors continue to report that volunteerism is important. Interestingly, the survey also discovered a trend toward wanting students to focus on one cause, to show they aren't simply going through the motions of volunteerism. Long-term commitment to a single cause or nonprofit indicates

perseverance and a more well-rounded applicant. Counselors want to see students taking on issues and having reasons for doing so rather than simply "checking off the box" on their applications. Yet, there still are colleges that appreciate the diverse range of opportunities and organizations a student might explore in high school.

It is confusing then that while we know society as a whole and colleges in general value community service, official service programs are not the norm in every U.S. high school. We expect this to change. There is a steady upward trend of high schools engaged in community service since a comprehensive service survey was completed by the NCES in 1999.[5] At that time, 86% reported that they recognized general community service and 46% of schools participated in some type of "service learning." These numbers were a substantial increase from 1984 when 27 percent reported community service and 9 percent reported service learning. More recently, in 2008, 68 percent of K-12 principals reported that their students participated in community service activities recognized by the school with a slight decrease in percentage engaged in service learning programs.[1] It appears that community service is becoming less instructional based and more focused on developing character and life skills.

Community service and service learning allow students to build context around their education and apply what they learn in school to real life examples while honing 21st century skills such as teamwork and problem solving. This "deeper learning" is an explicit goal of the Common Core, which pushes students to engage in problem solving, explore social issues and develop the ability to evaluate situations and develop solutions.[6, 7]

VARIATIONS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

High school community service programs fall under three loosely defined types. They may be very informal with a simple organizational structure, or be a graduation requirement with strict administrative procedures:

- Voluntary programs tend to be organized at a club level and have wide ranges of participation numbers depending on the school's culture. Large clubs like Mavericks Out Serving (MAVS) at Morton Ranch High School in Texas, have hundreds of students who give over 9,000 hours per year.[8] Clubs usually have a teacher or administrator "sponsor" responsible for overseeing the club, who gives direction and establishes rules. Sometimes this role is taken on by a parent volunteer (or two). Small clubs might only have one nonprofit they support or the club might focus on a specific issue like helping the local animal shelter or food closet. Voluntary programs may or may not offer official recognition upon graduation.

- Required programs stipulate that students must volunteer or serve a particular number of hours before graduating from high school, which is a common program of private schools, New Technology High Schools, and many charters. These schools tend to have at least one full-time

administrator who oversees the program including being the primary contact with charitable organizations, managing data, confirming (or directing others to confirm) hours given by students, and compiling reports for graduation and applications.

- Service Learning is a curriculum-based program where community service is organized in relation to instruction. The same management needs for required programs apply here but with the additional correlation to educational standards and typically, a greater emphasis placed on student reflections as lessons are tied to service.

- Individual Service Goals are often set by students wishing to serve in their community regardless of any school requirements. These students value service as part of their social, religious or community life. Most use their hours for college or scholarship applications, or to qualify for individual honor groups like the Scouts, Junior Rotary, Key Club or others.

PAIN POINTS IN MANAGEMENT

For schools where service is a requirement, some stipulate as little as ten hours per year, which may seem an easy number to manage on a per student basis. However, multiply 10 hours times 250, 500, or even 2,000 students, and there is serious potential to adversely affect the administrative team. Community service hours need to be monitored, approved, verified and recorded, which can be a daunting task even for the most seasoned administrator.

"If only this system were automated," is a common refrain echoed by countless guidance counselors and school administrators. "If only we didn't have to store all these binders!" Or, "I wish our students wouldn't lose their papers all the time!" Managing community service programs, either voluntary or mandatory, raises the same pain points for schools.

- First, it is difficult to connect students with safe and reliable volunteer opportunities in their community. Nonprofits are as frustrated by the effort needed to reach students as school administrators are at having to show students where to look or how to sign up.

- Second, for all their good intentions, students frequently forget their volunteering commitments, lose paperwork and tend to procrastinate when it comes to securing verification for hours worked.

- Third, mountains of paperwork verification and/or data entry take time and pull school staff away from more important personal interactions with students and peers.

- Fourth, storing community service data and producing reports for scholarship applications, graduation recognition or college applications is an onerous process when

data needs to be compiled by hand. Even data stored in a spreadsheet might require multiple steps to either enter data in*to* or pull *out of* a spreadsheet.

COMPLEX DATA NEEDS

Regardless of the program type and size, every community service program must have some method for 1) nonprofits to post their needs and publicize them to the students, 2) students to sign up for opportunities, 3) nonprofits to verify that students completed the work, 4) school representatives or volunteers to approve and record student work, 5) administrators to tabulate the hours students give, and 6) administrators or students to generate reports of completed hours with flexibility for various selections and formats.

The complexity and management needs of high school community service are directly correlated to how the data are used. Less formal programs have lighter data loads and may be able to rely on the individual student to track and record their own hours. While this is easier for the school to manage, there is less confidence in data integrity because students often forget to write down what they have done. Schools with formal, required community service programs have more substantive data needs. In addition to recording the student's name and other identifiers, schools need to record date of service, hours, location, type of service, supervisor (or verifying party) and more. In addition, required programs typically ask students to reflect on their service and write down the impact it had on themselves and on the organization or individuals they helped.

Formal or informal, the same sticking point exists: approval and verification are often the most difficult links in the process chain. Once a student completes his/her hours and turns in a report, those hours must be verified by the nonprofit either with a signature on a form or some other digital manner. A school official then approves those hours before they are recorded into a database or paper log. Problems arise when the student forgets to submit the forms or forgets to obtain the necessary verification for hours worked. Students required to write reflections will also have trouble recalling what they did if too much time passes.

Reports are needed either for analysis, for graduation or for beyond graduation. Students need to recall what they have done and may need to provide evidence when they apply to colleges, for scholarships or jobs. Academic and college guidance counselors need reports to determine which students have earned special award pins or cords upon graduation. The school or district may need reports to evaluate program effectiveness or to apply for grants. Multi-year reports might be needed to analyze a variety of factors from student engagement, effect of service on graduation, correlation to state assessment performance or a myriad of other considerations.

A school must consider the following when planning how it will manage and store data. How long will the data be stored? If a paper-based system, what are the physical storage capabilities? How will year-over-

year data be tracked? Will longitudinal data be needed to compare and analyze trends? If a private school, can service data be used to promote the school and attract new students?

If community service is high stakes — tied to graduation or to the awarding of honors and scholarships — data management and verification of hours rise to being a mission-critical task. In this case, there is no question that iron-clad approval and verification of hours are required, both at the nonprofit level and at the school level. Coordinating this information flow is extremely difficult with paper. Digital communication and a shared database standardize the format of the data and ensure integrity while easing the workflow.

With students, there is always a need to consider security including protection of student records and security at the work location. Emailing service records from location to location invites error and reduces security. Homegrown spreadsheets do not have the same protection as a professionally developed and maintained platform. A centralized database in a secure environment prevents data loss and protects its integrity.

Nonprofits have data management needs, too. Because not everyone earns a salary at a nonprofit, the organization may not have people who are responsible enough or familiar enough with data management, let alone have the time to follow strict protocols. These organizations are strapped for time so the simplest verification system possible is best. Nonprofits must adapt to poor attendance or no-shows. Students simply forget they have signed up to work, or transportation may be an issue, or a final comes up and they need to study. Therefore, it is helpful if nonprofits have an easy way to remind students of their commitment. Additionally, if students can easily reschedule when conflicts arise, they are more likely to do so, which gives the nonprofit advance notice and time to adjust.

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Students need to be able to locate suitable service opportunities. The best opportunities tug at their heartstrings while fitting into their notoriously busy schedules. Finding these opportunities and perhaps more significantly — scheduling to work there — can be a problem without a digital system. Some schools rely on the familiar bulletin board to post nonprofit needs. Effective? Sometimes, but still the student must call or email a contact to set up a time to work (or change times and dates if necessary). Most schools have a digital or print newsletter to post opportunities. Most schools have a daily public address (PA system) where they can announce opportunities, or they post them on the school website/page. Highly motivated students might seek out their own service opportunities although many schools prefer to control this process for logical reasons.

The integrity of data is critical for everyone involved. The plain fact is that data are more reliable when students record their hours and reflections, and obtain signatures confirming their work *immediately* upon completion. Waiting invites errors. Forms, either digital or print, must be turned in to the appropriate

person in a reasonable time, too, not at the end of the term or school year. Students need copies of their records at home so they can use them to apply for scholarships or jobs, or to compile service records for college applications. Most colleges require some certification of those hours which means the student must obtain a signature from a school official who has confirmed their hours.

X2VOL MAKES SERVICE EASIER

intelliVOL, the developers of x2VOL, considered all these needs and permutations of service programs when developing x2VOL, which is a web-based and mobile system that manages the entire process of community service and service learning from the nonprofit seeking help to the application being submitted by the student. x2VOL is accessed online, 24/7, from any web-enabled device, and includes an Android and iOS app for handhelds. The system was conceived and natively built for the school system and as such addresses every administrative task for formal or informal programs. x2VOL is easy to set up, use and secure. The entire chain of promotion-scheduling-verification-reporting is automated yet also allows flexibility to adjust for individual school or district needs.

x2VOL is the central communication hub and database where nonprofits, students and school staff can communicate and manage service hours, ensuring everyone is working with real-time data. The instant a student enters his/her hours, the nonprofit representative who oversaw the student's work can digitally verify that the student was there (much like a time clock confirms an hourly worker has punched in and out). Immediately, the school administrator sees each student's verified work online, where he might approve all the hours or approve some and flag others for further detail or inquiry. Those students who were flagged then know, through their own secure portal, that they must take additional action to clear up confusion or perhaps, add more information to their records such as expanded reflections on their service.

The nonprofit representative specifies the number of student volunteers needed, the days and hours, type of work and location, among other things. Students access x2VOL through their own secure portal where they see the opportunities prioritized by their level of interest. Scheduling then becomes an easy matter with the simplified list and standardized process. No longer do students have to call or email the nonprofit to schedule their time; they click and enter the hours they will work. An automated text or email message reminds the student of her commitment. If a student reschedules, the opportunity opens up for another student who could potentially fill the need.

Web-based systems like x2VOL solve all sorts of record-keeping issues. Updates to data are instantaneous and centralized. Tabulations are completed immediately. Printed verification forms are no longer needed. Passing paperwork from desk to desk is eliminated. The task of verifying or approving hours by individual student is eased because this can now be grouped by goals established by the school or based on other specific requirements. Alerts are automatically generated. Students receive reminder

emails for their commitments. School-approved nonprofits can more easily post and edit listings. Updates are made across the board and across all users instantaneously and keep everyone informed in real time. Data from an individual basis or by pre-established goals of any sort can be compiled at the click of a mouse with reports available on screen, or to export.

J Serra High School, a Catholic school in California, has used x2VOL since 2011. "Before using x2VOL, we required that the students fill out a form, take the form to their service location, get a supervisor to sign off and then return it to school where our administrative process began," explained Dan Everett, head of curriculum. "Once we got the form, we approved the hours by hand, entered it into a paper log or database and then filed the paper which we kept forever."

x2VOL eliminated J Serra's paperwork process entirely. "In an instant, paper was gone, data entry was gone," said Mr. Everett. The students noticed the difference too. They had a powerful system, accessed via computer or mobile device to simply click and confirm their hours. With record-keeping and reporting in a digital form students prefer, they now do a better job keeping track of their work. And with this simplified process, the total number of hours students give to local charities has steadily increased at the school.

Teacher Mary Miller from **St. Agnes Academy** in Memphis noticed that students improved in record keeping once their academy started using x2VOL. "Before x2VOL, paper submission and management was a nightmare!" said Ms. Miller. Students had to get a form at school and sometimes they would forget to take it to the charitable organization. That simple misstep meant students couldn't recall everything they had done and couldn't adequately write about their efforts. Once the form was submitted (either on time or late), teachers had to approve each form by hand and record it on the log sheet. Ms. Miller said, "The sheer busy-ness of this task put it pretty low on the 'need to do list.' We teachers would put off our recording duties and then scramble at the end of the year."

In the public schools, **Seven Lakes High School** in Katy, Texas has over 3,400 students and roughly half of them participate in Spartans Out Serving, which is a voluntary community service club. Seniors earn white cords at graduation for giving 60 hours of community service. In 2010/11, they switched from a paper-based system to x2VOL and immediately noticed the time savings and improved accuracy of their

program. Reams of paper and binders no longer clog the library tables. The approval process got easier and the end-of-semester rush disappeared. "Before x2VOL, students were handing in their hours all at one time, which put a time restraint on the sponsors to thoroughly review the hours," said Tracey Grimme, formerly the school's library media specialist who managed the transition to x2VOL.

Now Seven Lakes High School has an accurate picture of their students' work. School Principal Christie Whitbeck said that x2VOL gives her a more realistic picture of the community service culture in her school. "It is easier to understand the depth of what we are doing with a real-time system." School hours are approved throughout the year rather than in a massive rush at the end of the year, which is what typically happens in a paper-based system.

New Technology High Schools throughout the country also use x2VOL. Service Learning is a required component of the New Technology High Schools because it provides valuable job experience and connects students to the community where they can give back. x2VOL reflects the ideal of a 21st Century School where learning and administration are digital. Not only has the paperwork dance been eliminated but the connection to nonprofits and other service groups is enhanced in every instance where x2VOL is put to use in the New Technology schools. Immediate communication of data coupled with the scheduling ability and verification process makes x2VOL the grease in a smooth workflow.

AN ADMINISTRATOR'S ADVICE

Rom Crespo, assistance principal of **Morton Ranch High School**, states in an article about community service that students are digital natives who expect required tasks to reflect how "they get things done" with mobile devices.[6] These days, you'll never find students who are uncomfortable with data, mobile devices and the Internet. Students simply can't fathom that there is any other way to manage data, and for good reason. They have grown up in the digital world where there are web-based solutions for virtually every data need we can think of. And, if the solution doesn't exist now, it certainly will in the future.

Mr. Crespo points this out when writing about the transition from using paper to x2VOL to manage student service hours. "When we shifted to x2VOL, our students immediately understood that our administration took community service seriously, because we adopted a system reflecting our students' digital world. Bulletin boards are passé, but mobile apps are cool," added Mr. Crespo.

Community service and service learning demands will more than likely continue to grow as the number of states and districts adopt formal community service programs (see sidebar). The web gives added security options, flexibility for individual and group needs, enhances real-time communication and allows for immediate reporting with abundant options. x2VOL was developed to capitalize on these opportunities and provide schools with a 21st Century solution to keep up with the growing demand for community service.

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