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## Defining Voluntary Activities: Commonly Associated Terms

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**Abstract.** Voluntary activities are commonly recognized as a means to give back to the community while also attaining experience. Various institutions have made voluntary activities a requirement of completing academic programs—secondary institutions require students to complete community service hours to graduate, and increasingly, post-secondary institutions require students to apply knowledge and skills learned through community service opportunities in the community. Other institutions, such as corporations and businesses, have also provided opportunities for individuals to gain experience through voluntary activity, otherwise known as unpaid internships, over a fixed period of time. With the increase in demand for opportunities to gain experience, and organizations seeking individuals to assist with day-to-day operations, voluntary activity commonly referred to as volunteering has become a term widely misunderstood to categorize various types of opportunities. This article seeks to define different types of voluntary activities using four commonly misused terms: volunteering, co-operative education, internships, and placements. Defining these terms will assist individuals in identifying opportunities that achieve their goals and objectives, and assist organizations in creating positions that reflect the standards and policies inherent in the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement and Ministry of Labor, governing contributions in the voluntary sector.

**Keywords:** *voluntary activity, volunteering, co-operative education, internship, placement, Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement*

### 1 History of Volunteering

The term ‘voluntary activity’ or ‘volunteering’ has no standard definition, but is widely agreed to be an act of contributing without receiving any monetary reward in return. *Volunteer Canada* goes beyond this definition to state that volunteering is “work [that is] unpaid, relatively un-coerced, and primarily for the benefit of others to qualify as volunteering”<sup>i</sup>. Documentation of voluntary activity began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, recorded and defined in 1755 by the Middle French dictionary as ‘one who enters into military service voluntary and is not conscripted’<sup>ii</sup>. In the United States, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by a limited number of charitable organizations that took on responsibility of mobilizing groups to assist in

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responding to national crises, and to serve the disadvantaged in various communities. A few of these organizations that still exist today include: the Young Men’s Christian Association (now known as the YMCA), the American Red Cross, Kiwanis International, and Lions Club International.

However, despite lack of documentation, volunteering has long been an aspect of human life in various countries. In analyzing historical data on voluntary activity, Susan Ellis and Katherine Campbell highlight the ‘tendency to assume that volunteering has only taken place in the social welfare area and not to see voluntary activity in other aspects of life, including political and cultural arenas’<sup>iii</sup>. Individuals and groups have in the past, and presently, taken on ad-hoc duties of altruistic nature to fight for a cause and/or basic rights, to develop and/or enhance their communities, and to serve others on their own accord, without assistance from an organization. This type of voluntary activity is referred to as ‘informal volunteering’<sup>iv</sup>. Attention given to volunteering has increased steadily in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the proliferation of community service organizations and private organizations addressing needs in the community, coupled with the citizen’s desire to gain experience and make a direct, immediate contribution to a cause of their choice. Offering voluntary activity through an organization has been referred to as ‘formal volunteering’, which through the assistance of the organization, provides specific opportunities for engagement. The desire to gain experience, and the need for organizations to increase capacity to deliver programs and services have resulted in the changing landscape of how voluntary activity has been commonly misunderstood and associated with other similarly classified types of engagement in the community. These classifications include co-operative education placements, and internships.

### **Co-operative education/placements**

Cooperative education is defined as a ‘structured way of learning that combines in-class learning with periods of actual work’<sup>v</sup>. Students are able to apply theories learned in the classroom by gaining work experience in an organization that helps to reinforce learning and earn credit towards academic studies. Key characteristics of this type of opportunity include: it is generally facilitated between the student and a

secondary school for a specific program, there may be specific eligibility requirements (i.e. maintaining certain levels of achievement), and completing the co-operative may often consist of a final evaluation and/or assignments.

## **Internship**

An internship is one of the most commonly sought after opportunities to gain first hand experience in an organization. An internship is defined as ‘a professional working position that is typically offered to students or inexperienced workers’<sup>vi</sup>. They provide individuals with the opportunity to gain experience in a particular field, while also providing the organization with a worker for a set period of time. This type of opportunity is typically paid, and varies in terms of eligibility requirements (i.e. post secondary education or minimum 6 months relative experience). Key characteristics of this type of opportunity include gaining on the job training and experience, and potential for the opportunity to result in full time employment. Recent controversy surrounding internships have been centered on an increasing trend of internships becoming unpaid, and individuals reporting being exploited, ‘often replacing unpaid workers and completing a wide range of duties’<sup>vii</sup>. This has raised much confusion, as some associate volunteering as potential exploitation. However, comparing the types of opportunities highlights key differences in the outcomes of engagement.

## **Volunteering: Key Concepts**

Recalling the definition of volunteering highlighted earlier, there are a few key concepts that differentiate the activity from other means of engagement in the community. The first concept is *without accepting monetary reward*. Monetary reward refers to receiving compensation for contributions. However, compensation need not be monetary and can also include non-monetary incentives, described as ‘any transaction that does not involve cash’<sup>viii</sup>. A second concept of volunteering entails *lack of coercion*. Coercion refers to being forced to conduct an activity against one’s own will. At the core of ‘voluntary activity’ is the assumption that one is willing to contribute their time, which leads into the third concept of

*primarily for the benefit of others.* One's decision to engage in voluntary activity is also generally assumed to be for the objective of helping others in their community. Lastly, a key concept largely overlooked is that voluntary activity takes place generally in non-profit charitable organizations. A non-profit organization is defined as a 'club, society, or association that is organized solely for the purposes of social welfare, civic improvement, or any other purpose except profit'<sup>ix</sup>. However, various benefits have been derived from volunteering that is similarly shared in the other types of engagement.

### **Commonalities and Differences**

A common factor shared in volunteering and other types of engagement is that the contribution is unpaid. In each opportunity, individuals are expected to seek out an organization that identifies with a cause or area of interest, and be willing to contribute without compensation to the organization to achieve their mission and vision. In all opportunities, it is expected that the experience will produce a common outcome of applying skills learned to serve the benefit of the organization whilst also gaining practical experience. However, key differentiating factors include the objective for volunteering, the nature of the opportunity, and the type of organization offering the opportunity. Cooperative education and/or placements are commonly understood as volunteering due to the contributions made to the organization without compensation. However, co-operative placements provide a non-monetary compensation—credit given towards attainment of an educational certificate. Due to non-monetary value, volunteering for the benefit of others may not be present in this opportunity. These type of opportunities due to their objective and nature also take place in non-profit or for profit organization. Unpaid internships have also been commonly understood as volunteering due to the nature of providing free labor for a for profit organization. However, key guidelines have been developed in the for profit and voluntary sector to address this misunderstanding. The *Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement (CCVI)* provides guiding principles for volunteer involvement in non-profit organizations only, outlining key practices to support and foster volunteer engagement in the community. A few key standards developed to support organizations include

‘developing policies and procedures, risk management, and the development of volunteer roles linked to the organization’s mission that are reviewed with those interested in engaging at the organization’<sup>x</sup>. Through this process, a key principle shared in volunteer engagement and identified by the *Ontario Employment Standards Act* in addressing unpaid practical experience, is under any agreement, no ‘individual [should] displace employees’ of an organization’<sup>xi</sup>. Thus, whether unpaid or paid, no individual should be performing work to gain experience that would be generally the responsibility of a staff member already serving the organization, or the position turning from paid to voluntary. For both the individual and the organization, voluntary activity is no longer volunteering once compensation whether benefits that may be construed as direct value or asset of the organization are provided. The CCVI works to help foster key concepts in volunteering to help individuals become better engaged in their community, and to help organizations understand the true origins and spirit of volunteering.

## Conclusion

Volunteering is a great way to become involved in the community, gain valuable first hand experience, and work together with others to achieve a common cause. Academic institutions and employment organizations acknowledge the benefits of volunteering, and encourage individuals to seek volunteer opportunities with the purposes of co-operative placements and internships within community service organizations. However, volunteering differs from these type of opportunities in terms of the objective, nature of compensation, and type of organization offering the opportunity. Standards set out by the Ministry of Labor governing unpaid practical work experience and the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement will assist an organization in determining proper classification and potential partnerships for offering opportunities within their organization.

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<sup>iii</sup> Susan J. Ellis & Katherine H. Campbell. ‘*By the People: A History of Americans as Vounteers*’. New Century Edition. 2005, 386.

<sup>iv</sup> Paul B. Reed & Kevin Selbee. ‘*Formal and Informal Volunteering and Giving: Regional and Community Patterns in Canada*’. Statistics Canada and Carleton University. 2000. 2.

<sup>v</sup> Government of Canada. ‘*Services for Youth: Co-operative Education*’. 2013-09-25.  
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<sup>vi</sup> Government of Canada. ‘*Services for Youth: Internships*’. 2013-09-25.  
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<sup>vii</sup> Aleksandra Sagan. ‘*Unpaid internships exploit vulnerable generation*’. CBC News. 2013-Jul-02. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/unpaid-internships-exploit-vulnerable-generation-1.1332839>

<sup>viii</sup> BusinessDictionaryOnline. ‘*Non-Montary Reward*’.  
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<sup>ix</sup> Canada Revenue Agency. ‘*Non-profit organizations*’.2012-08-27. <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/nprft/menu-eng.html>

<sup>x</sup> Volunteer Canada. ‘*Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement: Values, Guiding Principles, and Standards of Practice*’. 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> Ministry of Labor. *Employment Standards Act, S.O. 2000. Subsection 2.4.* [http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_00e41\\_e.htm#s1s2](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_00e41_e.htm#s1s2)