Volunteering at the Smithsonian:
An Overview of the Smithsonian's Museum Information Desk Program

Regie Marie Plana-Alcuaz
Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

Abstract. Established in 1846, the Smithsonian Institution is the largest and one of the best known educational and research institutes in the world. Overseeing nineteen museums, nine research centers and the National Zoo, the Smithsonian Institution is also affiliated with 168 other museums in 39 states, Panama, and Puerto Rico. With this wide network, it has only relied on volunteers for support. These volunteers are the first faces seen by the Smithsonian Institution's visitors and they directly benefit the Smithsonian in terms of savings; their wages and benefits replenish the institution's expenditures in operations, programs, and administrative and support services. This paper highlights the training programs for these volunteers. The objectives of this paper were: 1) to provide a brief comparative description of the volunteer programs; 2) to examine the training provided to volunteers in the museum information desk program; 3) to consider volunteer motivations for volunteering; 4) to look at rates of and reasons for attrition; and 5) to study possible correlations between the training program and volunteer retention rates.

Keywords: Smithsonian Institution, volunteer, programs, training, retention, attrition

Volunteering has had a long history in the United States. From the first colonies in the sixteenth century (O'Connell, 1998) to the present day, when 26.8 percent of Americans are active volunteers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), volunteerism is alive and well. A timeline of volunteering in the Americas shows that on December 7, 1736, Benjamin Franklin started the first volunteer firefighting company (Independence Hall Association, n.d.). Prior to that, the first known written record of the word volunteer can be found at The Proceedings of the Old Bailey: London's Central Criminal Court 1674-1913 (Hitchcock, Shoemaker, Emsley, Howard, & McLaughlin, 2012) where transcriptions of verbal testimonies during trials of that time period can be found. At that time, the word volunteer held a mostly military meaning, specifically for service at sea. In the 1970s, the word volunteering had become synonymous with "community service," with the connotation of a more civilian definition (Daniels, 2010).

To be a volunteer means to deliver a need for one's knowledge, skills, or services, without overt implication of a financial or physical return. One cannot be considered a volunteer if adequate financial compensation were provided, or one would be called an employee. Although one does not expect to be paid for volunteering, there is frequently some inherent recompense for people who engage in this activity, and it is usually in the currency of emotional or spiritual well being, a psychological benefit as it were. From the website of the University of California San Diego (2012), among the top reasons people volunteer include reducing stress, increasing health, gaining professional experience, promoting personal growth and self-esteem, and learning. Grimm, Jr., Spring, and Dietz (2007) report that findings from studies show correlation between health and volunteering: healthier people volunteer more, while volunteering has the consequence of improving physical and mental health, reinforcing the cycle. This connection is explained by the social integration theory (Cohen, Bressette, Skoner & Doyle, 2005) where social integration was concluded to have led to lower mortality rates, supporting theories that suggest occupying diverse social roles leads to better health. Corollary to this, volunteering could also lead to employment or better job prospects, for those who exercise old skills or learn new ones that become useful to any organization. In sharing one's knowledge or skills, one may opine that the work one volunteered for could count towards leaving behind a legacy for future generations, since civic-mindedness is a crucial element of volunteering (University of California San Diego, 2012). The common good is a frequent rationale for this usually social activity. Whether for emergencies or for scheduled regular volunteering, the act, in its end, fulfills a multitude of needs for the beneficiary and even perhaps for the volunteer.

Definitions and Value of Volunteering

According to Anheier & Salamon (2001), the definitions for volunteering differ worldwide. Israel and the US are cited as identifying volunteering with cultural identity and community expectations. For Britain and Australia, it is

viewed as a separate sector of the community, closely related to Locke's "concepts of a self-organising society outside the confines of the state." In Germany, volunteering is akin to trusteeship of associations and foundations, such as "honorary officers," in contrast with service activities, which were seen as the responsibility of the church.

For international organizations such as The Red Cross or the United Nations, the description of volunteering uses terms such as "reach out," "contribute," which are related to society, pointing out that the individual goes beyond oneself to the community, whether of humans or animals (i.e. as volunteers at wildlife preserves). For the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), a volunteer is one who performed unpaid volunteer activities through or for an organization, not including those that volunteer more informally. This may be too narrow a definition, for there are so many individual volunteers who do so sporadically and on their own. Additionally, this explanation is unclear, as it uses the word itself in the definition. For this study, Smith's (1994) definition of volunteering as "contribution of time without coercion or remuneration" for public benefit will be used.

The Multi-Paradigm Model of Volunteering proposed by Macduff (2006) elaborates on four basic categories of volunteer service: Traditional, Serendipitous, Social Change and Entrepreneurial, which hinge on two continuums of volunteer behavior from subjectivism to objectivism and stability to radical change. Within subjectivism, volunteers believe that people influence reality; those that fall under objectivism believe in seeking truth and direction externally. Volunteers that seek order and incrementally predictable change are classified under stability; radical change volunteers aim for advocacy and fundamental change. This bears very little relation to four categories of volunteers that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (2006) provides information on: professional, unskilled, spontaneous, and affiliated. Professional volunteers use their specialized training, whether related to health, the law, religion, and may volunteer either individually or as groups. Unskilled volunteers provide time and labor, and may need some training. Spontaneous volunteers may be skilled or unskilled, but are frequently found after crises or catastrophes, and may have special management challenges. Affiliated volunteers are usually community-based organizations that have trained their members and have a mechanism in place to initiate services. These may not be mutually exclusive: any volunteer could fit two or more categories at the same time. These categories are not defined according to a certain common factor. Professional and unskilled volunteers are defined according to training and experience or lack thereof. Spontaneous volunteers relate to time commitment (versus regular volunteers that give a certain amount of time), while Affiliated volunteers are from groups (versus individuals). However, for the purposes of this paper, these categories may be of some use, as there seems to be no formally recognized volunteer types.

Wing, Pollak, and Blackwood (2008) calculated the percentage of time volunteers from the year 2006 provided according to the type of activity they engaged in, and the largest percentages fell under travel, administrative and support, social service and care, and other. From this, one might presume that the bulk of volunteering done does not seem to require professionals to do the work. The same population of volunteers, when broken down into the types of organization, showed that the largest groups were religious, educational or youth service, and social or community service. 2008-2010 statistics provided by Corporation for National and Community Service (2011) show perhaps more defined and specific percentages of where people volunteered: Religious (35.0%), Educational (26.7%), Social Services (14.0%), Health (8.4%), Civic (5.5%), Sports/Arts (3.4%) and Other (7.0%). The top four activities that volunteers engaged in were Fund-raising (26.5%), Collection and distribution of food (23.5%), General labor (20.3%) and Tutoring/teaching (18.5%), which again supports the idea that unskilled volunteers may be the largest group. A possible difficulty that arises with defining where volunteers work is that there may be some organizations that fit more than one kind, but for simplicity's sake were classified as one type over another.

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (2011), the assigned hourly wages for volunteers in the United States for the year 2010 was $23.36. In the same year, 26.3% of the national population volunteered their time and labor, contributing to a total of approximately 8.1 billion hours and valued at $173 billion U.S. dollars! That's larger than the GDP of most countries. The benefits of having volunteers are evident. Aside from the financial aspects, they may provide access to a greater range of expertise and experience, increase paid staff members' effectiveness by freeing their time for more necessary tasks, provide resources for maintenance, increase public awareness and program visibility, among others. Conversely, there is another side to this – having volunteers also presents challenges, such as the investment of time in training and supervision, lack of competence, competition with paid staff, lower professional standards, increase in insurance rates, and inability to negotiate for additional funding or new paid staff positions (FEMA, 2006). Further calculations show a pattern of volunteering prevalent within the lifecycle: the lowest rates of volunteers were in the 20-24 age group while at the peak were those

between the ages of 35 to 44 (Corporation for National And Community Service, 2011). Although no explanation was provided for this, it may be postulated that many youths between the ages of 20-24 are looking for further independence upon reaching legal age, and paid employment provides a measure of independence for this age group, or they are starting a family. Those in middle age may be mid-career, be more settled with family obligations, and can devote more time to outside interests and volunteering.

The Smithsonian Institution

The Smithsonian Institution, the largest and one of the best known educational and research institutes in the world (Smithsonian Institution, 2012), started as a bequest in 1829 from a man who had never set foot in America. It currently oversees nineteen museums, the National Zoo, as well as nine research centers, and is affiliated with 168 other museums in 39 states, Panama, and Puerto Rico.   James Smithson, an English chemist and mineralogist, had envisioned "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men," and bequeathed property worth 104,960 gold sovereigns, 8 shillings, and seven pence, which was converted to $508,318.46 in 1838. An Act of Congress signed by President James K. Polk on August 10, 1846 established the Smithsonian Institution. A Board of Regents and a Secretary of the Smithsonian (or chief executive) administer this trust.
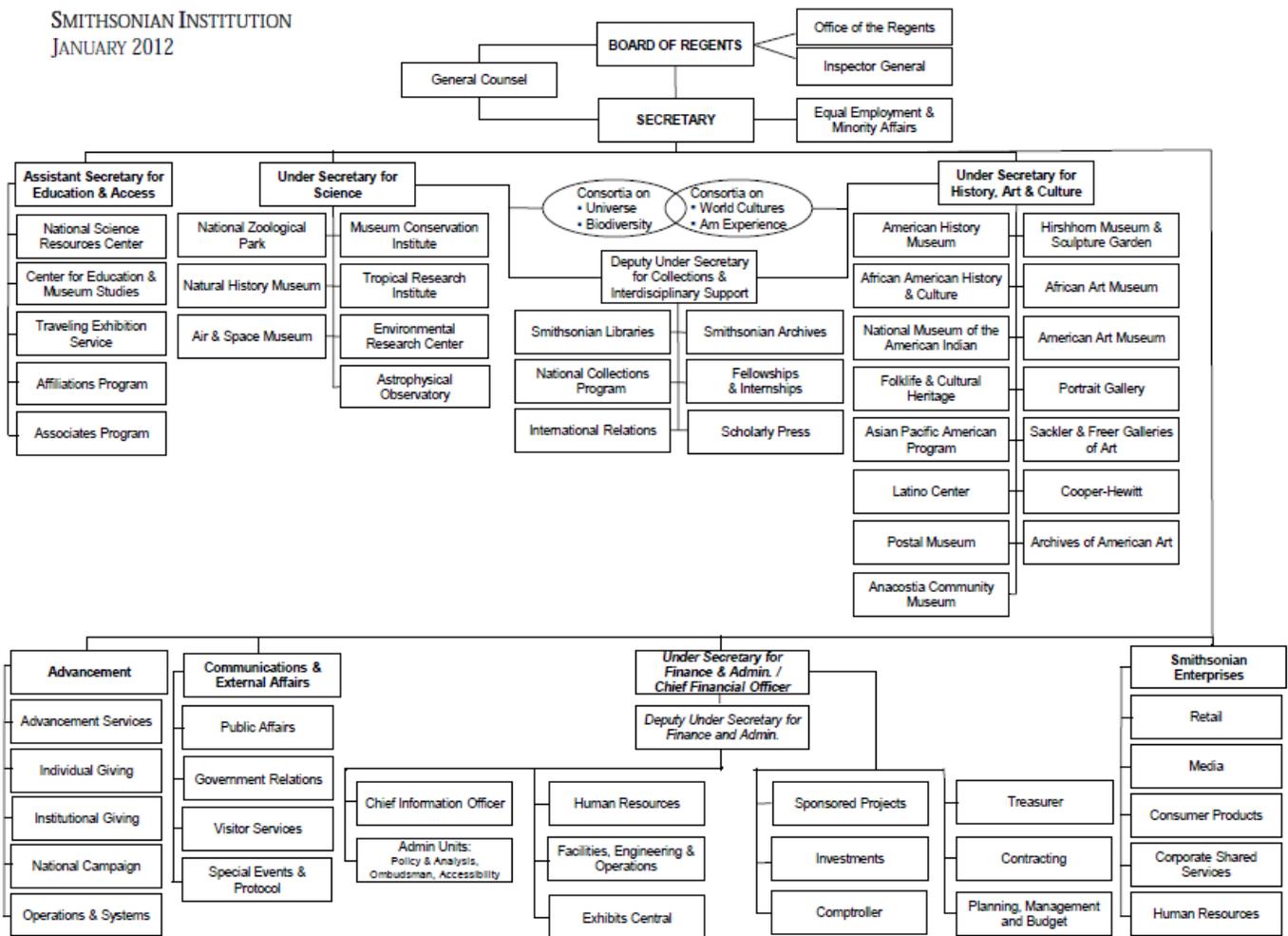

Figure 1. Smithsonian Institution organizational chart

Since its establishment in 1846, the Smithsonian has relied on volunteers for support. In 1849, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian, Joseph Henry established a network of 150 volunteer weather observers. Their "training"

consisted of instructions, and they received standardized forms and some instruments. These volunteers submitted monthly reports of several daily observations and comments on weather phenomena. However, he ran into the problem of interpretation of these volunteers' observations and employed a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at Lafayette College, James Coffin, to do the job. A daily weather map that was later on developed from this project and displayed in the Smithsonian Castle became the precursor of newspaper weather reports. The culmination of this volunteer activity was the National Weather Service, which still exists today (Milikan, 2007).

The Smithsonian Associates' Reception Center began in October 1971 as a service to National Associates whose paid membership supports programming by the Smithsonian Institution. In June 1975, it became the Visitor Information and Associates' Reception Center to serve, not just the National Associates, but also the general public. The third incarnation of this office on January 2012, the Office of Visitor Services, is under the Communications and External Affairs division on the Smithsonian Organizational chart (Smithsonian Institution, 2012).

Attracting diverse volunteers and providing them with recognition, appreciation, incentives and rewards is stated on the Smithsonian's strategic plan FY 2010-2015 under the objective of attracting, maintaining and optimizing a diverse and competent workforce (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.)

There are presently seven programs for volunteers to participate in: docent, special support, citizen science (which are managed by their respective museums), seasonal (supervised by Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage or Smithsonian Gardens), museum information desk, telephone information, and behind the scenes (which are overseen by the Office of Visitor Services). The largest of these is behind the scenes, with 6,500 volunteers (B. Blandy, personal communication, September 1, 2012), followed by museum information desk, which at present count is composed of 527 active volunteers (with 31 on extended leave for various reasons), who served 28.6 million visitors in 2011. Mary Grace Potter served as founding Director of VIARC from 1970 till 2002, succeeded by Katherine Neill Ridgley, who was Director from 2002 to 2011. A member of the Office of Communications has headed the department since then in an acting capacity (M. Rubin, personal communication, September 1, 2012).

Volunteers directly benefit the Smithsonian in terms of savings for wages and benefits which go back to operations, programs, and administrative and support services. However, effective management of volunteers is crucial to maintain continued participation in the program. Additionally, the number of volunteers is affected by the fact that, according to the US Census in 2010 (Ren, 2011), Washington, DC is the third most transient place in America. The objectives of this paper are (1) to provide a brief comparative description of the volunteer programs at the Smithsonian; (2) to examine the training provided to volunteers in the museum information desk program; (3) to consider volunteer motivations for volunteering; (4) to look at rates of and reasons for attrition; (5) to study possible correlations between the training program and volunteer retention rates. This paper provides an overview and data was gathered through the Smithsonian website, interviews, emails, and volunteer roll calls. At this point in time, statistical data through surveys could not be obtained.

Volunteer Programs at the Smithsonian

Each docent program is managed by its respective museum and thus training programs, eligibility requirements, openings, and time commitments can vary. Some operate October through May; others train year-round. Two of the Smithsonian museums in DC provided more specific information on their training program: the National Portrait Gallery and the American Art Museum are housed in the same building and are run similarly. The initial training course takes two hours weekly for six months for the National Portrait Gallery and seven or eight months for the American Art Museum. It must be noted that they do only train docents every three or four years because annual training would produce a surfeit of docents, more than are necessary for the museums and would lead to under-utilization of resources. The reason for American Art Museum's longer training period is because they have two buildings – part of the collection is at the Renwick building near the White House. The process includes a preliminary interview, and then the training commences. It includes information on the museum, the building, the Smithsonian, and the permanent collection as well as presentation and tour techniques. At the end of training, volunteers are expected to pass a practical test. Docents are requested to make at least a two-year commitment to the program after training, although no previous training is required. Aside from the initial training, volunteer docents are also expected to read materials in preparation for and as follow-up. They are required to give a minimum number of four tours per month and to attend regular, monthly in-service training sessions for current and upcoming exhibitions (J. Walker, personal communication, August 30, 2012).

Special support program volunteer opportunities are available at Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Freer and Sackler Galleries, National Air and Space Museum, National Museum of American History, National Museum of Natural History, National Museum of the American Indian, National Postal Museum, National Zoological Park and the Smithsonian Associates. They usually consist of various public programs such as hands-on activities, demonstrations, gallery talks, ticketing for performances, exhibit interpreters, staff assistance for special events and other museum-specific projects. The Visitor Services Program of the National Air and Space Museum, which handles and trains its own museum desk volunteers, falls under this category. Prospective volunteers are interviewed and are given one day of customer service training, with further on-the-job training.

The behind the scenes program do not consist of one body of volunteers working on one project – there are multiple projects they work on, based on the different staff members that need help for random things for their department. What they require is not so much training as experience. If applicants have the necessary skills to work for certain projects, they would be referred to a behind the scenes supervisor. First, they interview with a volunteer recruitment specialist. Then the supervisor with the project would interview them and find out if they're a good fit. Any additional training or resources or tools would be provided for them individually by the supervisor. The volunteers are trained the Smithsonian way, but the training varies on how much knowledge and skill volunteer possess, as well as per project. Examples of this are Fossil Lab assistants who show various pieces of the collection to the public, or show them how an archaeologist would go about preserving a fossil. Ten to eleven weeks of training are required for that specific position. For conservation of artifacts, someone without training in conservation would not be chosen for these kinds of projects where knowledge or foundation is necessary. Volunteers already in the volunteer corps, if they are interested, can pursue other behind-the-scenes projects (N. Burton, personal communication, August 30, 2012).

There are currently two main seasonal programs: the Folklife Festival run by The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and Smithsonian Gardens which needs interpreters, garden volunteers, greenhouse volunteers, and a landscape architect. The Folklife Festival is held annually for two weeks in summer, and volunteers may apply for any of twenty positions that interest them, ranging from selling vendor products at the Marketplace, to assisting festival participants in their demonstrations, recycling, transporting, manning the information booth, documenting, assisting in performances or preparing food. After the application has been accepted, the volunteers are invited to attend a two-hour orientation with staff introductions, a tour of the Festival site, and meetings with lead volunteers. Smithsonian Gardens on the other hand provides six training sessions on content and interpretation prior to interacting with the public. Four-hour shifts biweekly are the required time commitment.

Citizen Science has three volunteer opportunities that relate to the environment. The Smithsonian Tree Banding Project is global and involves volunteers posting data online regarding the growth rate of trees in their area. The Smithsonian Environmental Research Center train their volunteers to assist research staff in the field or laboratory, education staff in the Reed Center, and to lead outside educational activities. The Neighborhood Nest Watch is similar to the Tree Banding Project in online reporting and recording, but involves the avian population and the success of nests in different settings.

The telephone information program volunteers go through the same class as museum desk volunteers and have similar experiences with hands on training at their site. They are the smallest group, with 18 members at present count (B. Blandy, personal communication, September 1, 2012).

Museum Information Desk

The Museum Information Desk program volunteers would fall under the affiliated and traditional categories previously mentioned. The Smithsonian provides their training after which they are dispatched to their assigned museums. The type of work that they do is classified as stable, as there are set times for shifts and they carry out pre-arranged tasks. Prior to starting at their desks, these volunteers apply, are trained, and then are screened by background checks. Paid staff members supervise Museum Information Desk volunteers.

There are currently two classes being offered – spring and fall – and training for these volunteers takes 4-5 days. The first day introduces them to the Smithsonian, the program, the Office of Visitor Services department and the different museums. On the second day, volunteers learn about how to work the museums' computer system, while

the third day is about the visitor experience, which is essentially about customer service concepts. The fourth day was previously when the volunteers were tested on their learning but another day of computer training was added in 2012 to address the need for further practice. The current training program has become more complex. When the program started, volunteers were trained on using the binders, of which 6-9 were provided for the desk and covered topics such as memos, the calendar, exhibits, membership, building business, visitor information and so on. During the late '90s, computers started to be used at the information desks. Whereas prior to 2011, Central Services were in charge of managing the volunteers, now the individual museums manage their volunteers after the Office of Visitor Services has trained them.

1971 to late 80s	Late 80s to mid 90s	Mid to late 90s	Late 90s to 2002	2002 to 2008	2008-2011	2011 to present
Mary Grace Potter Carolyn Clampitt Lois Brown	Lawanda Randall	Catherine Similie	Elizabeth Bennett	Phil Almeida	Ken Burke	Mike Rubin

Figure 2. Volunteer training coordinators timeline

Since 1971, the training coordinators have changed seven times; starting with seven women (three worked together from 1971 to the late '80s), with three men in succession since 2002. The training program is constantly evolving incrementally, but acquired many changes in 2002, when Phil Almeida, a former teacher, took over and incorporated more classroom-type experiences. The current training coordinator, Mike Rubin, has made even more modifications due to changing visitor expectations: he added a fifth day of training and focused more on visitor experience, social media, and accessibility, as well as revised homework assignments and invited more guest speakers to talk about different Smithsonian museums and departments. An example of the latter is Smithsonian Castle/Information Center Coordinator Bill Blandy, whose invaluable experience comes from having been with the Smithsonian for 32 years, and who started as a volunteer himself. M. Rubin also hired two volunteer recruitment specialists and two volunteer training assistants (behind-the-scenes positions) for administrative tasks (B. Blandy & M. Rubin, personal communication, August 22, 2012).

The Smithsonian has not had much difficulty with attracting volunteers, although Rubin mentioned that they are aiming for a higher number of applicants and hoping to add a winter class. The name provides instant recall, and it is well known worldwide, especially because of its television and film programming. Its immense collection also attracts researchers and scientists. Both M. Rubin and B. Blandy agree that the Smithsonian's name is a common reason why people would choose to volunteer for the Institution. Training programs for Museum Information Desk occur two times a year, fall and spring, and each group has an average of 30-40 people. Noel Burton, Volunteer Recruitment Specialist, provided information from the spring 2012 training group: of 45 individuals, 62% of applicants were white, 20% were black, 18% were other; 84% were female, 16% were male; 8% were individuals with disabilities. In terms of age, 24% were 20-29 years old, 24% were 30-39 years old, 11% were 40-49 years old, 13% were 50-59 years old, 20% were 60-69 years old, and 6% were 70 years and above (N. Burton, personal communication, August 30, 2012).

The foremost task that a Museum Information Desk volunteer would be expected to do is to answer questions from the public. Visitors' questions are usually about where to locate objects or certain facilities (i.e. restroom, café, specific exhibits); things to do at the museum on that day (e.g. special events such as film showings, activities for families); and even suggestions for restaurants or how to find places or events outside of the building, within the metropolitan Washington, DC area.

Attrition and Retention

The 2010 U.S. Census (Ren, 2011) establishes that the District of Columbia is the third most transient area in the United States, with only 37.3 of the current population born there. There are many possible reasons for this: DC is home to the federal government, many embassies and foreign missions; the possible changes in government administrations every 4-8 years; nearby military bases. M. Rubin mentioned that there are some volunteers who are members of diplomatic or military families or who hold temporary jobs and they are aware that they can only volunteer for a certain span of time. B. Blandy referred to other reasons for attrition, such as loss of job or job transfer, pursuit of further education, illness or death. Both also agreed that there are volunteers that outgrow the

position or feel that it is no longer a good fit for them or even that the program outgrew them, such as the veteran volunteers who could not adjust to changes in technology. In fact, B. Blandy pointed out that there were about 30 volunteers who still did not have an email address, which was necessary to log in for the volunteer shift at the desk (B. Blandy & M. Rubin, personal communication, August 22, 2012).

M. Rubin stated that among the ways that the Office of Visitor Services is retaining volunteers, included keeping the training program fun, interesting and relevant, providing benefits such as discounts (membership, stores, tickets), parking, enrichment training, and when necessary, allowing a few volunteers to be have a less rigid schedule for volunteering. Each volunteer had to do at least two shifts per month to remain active and, according to B. Blandy, there were approximately ten volunteers that had requested and are on a more flexible volunteering schedule (B. Blandy & M. Rubin, personal communication, August 22, 2012).

The next figure shows the percentage of volunteers from each year, starting in 1991 when roll calls started to be kept, that have stayed as museum desk volunteers. No records could be found for 1993, hence the flat line. As can clearly be seen, the years with the largest attrition of volunteers were those who started in 1991, 1992, and 2002. It is noteworthy that the last of these was the year immediately after the events of September 11. While volunteerism had been on the rise after that year (Penner, Brannick, Webb, & Connell, 2005; Lowe & Fothergill, 2003), it appears that the urge to volunteer had waned over time. The biggest drop on this chart was within the first two years. This

Smithsonian Museum Desk Volunteers 1991-2011
Percentage of volunteers remaining from each year
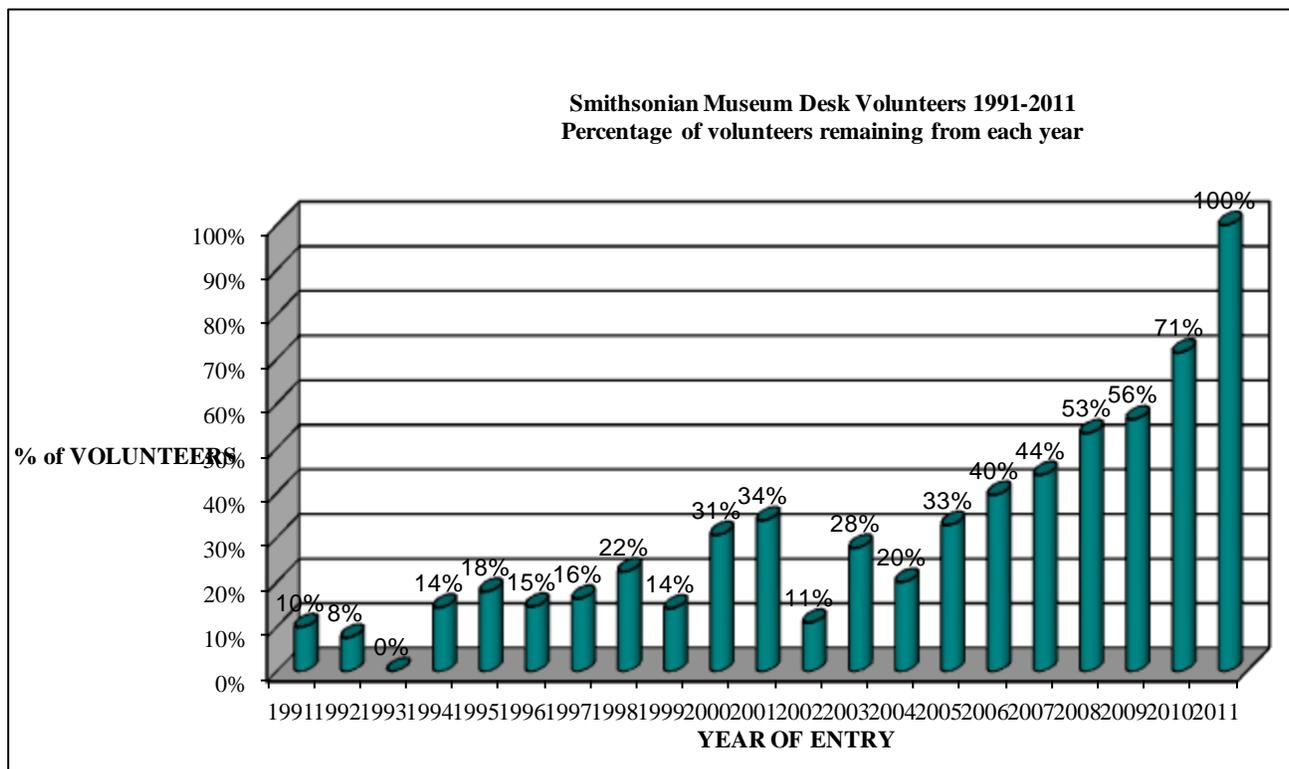
could possibly tie in with the reasons provided by M. Rubin and B. Blandy above where people decide that they've outgrown the position. For some people, the work of a museum information desk volunteer can be repetitive and boring, with visitors asking the same questions all the time (e.g. the location of the restroom being the most common one). It is also possible that one is assigned on shifts with disagreeable partner(s) and may be discouraged from continuing to volunteer.

Figure 3. Percentage of remaining volunteers from each year

Changes in the federal government administration may bear some influence on attrition rates if one were to examine the year after the handover from one party to the next after two terms in office: 2001 was when the president elected to office changed from Democratic to Republican, 2009 marked the opposite. In the last two years that President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, held office, the volunteers that came in are still notably high in number. Events in history, such as the wars in the Middle East, could have kept the numbers up for the last years of President George W.

Bush's term (2008-09), as military personnel, diplomats, and their families may live in the metropolitan Washington, DC area.

With these results, there appears to be no correlation between the training program and volunteer retention rates. This is further supported by the next figure, which shows the average rate of volunteer attrition for each year that is spent in the Museum Information Desk program. It is evident that the steepest rate of decline in numbers occurs within the first two years. Past the four-year mark, people are more likely to stay on as museum information desk volunteers and are more likely to leave for reasons outside their control such as changes in work or illness. Some of the figures vary also because there are volunteers that leave and return after one year or so. However, after a certain period of time, these volunteers are required to do a refresher course or even repeat days of training, depending on the length of their leave (M. Rubin, personal communication, September 1, 2012).
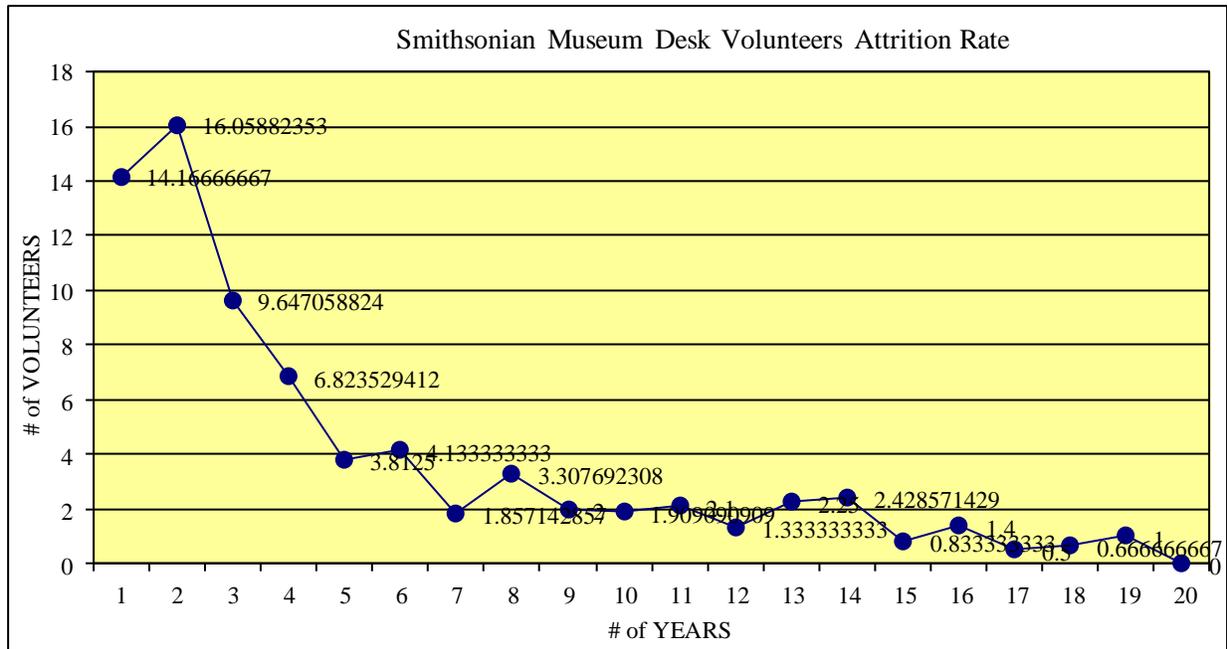

Smithsonian Museum Desk Volunteers Attrition Rate

Figure 4. Smithsonian museum desk volunteers attrition rate

Recommendations

This paper serves the purpose of introducing what volunteering at the Smithsonian entails for a Museum Information Desk volunteer. It is not intended to be an exhaustive resource given that records for the program have only started to be kept in 1991, although the program itself started in 1970. Additionally, statistical details were limited as no surveys could be done due to time constraints, lack of access, inadequate resources, and also because of the information privacy law. To date, there have been very little, if any at all, formal studies done on Smithsonian volunteers and how they benefit the Smithsonian greatly, as evidenced by this research. Further studies on Smithsonian volunteers are recommended. Without volunteers, the Smithsonian museums with their limited budget may not remain free of charge as they currently are. The Fiscal Commission in 2010 suggested that the Smithsonian charge fees to save $225 million, as its budget approaches $1 billion in 2015 (Bowles & Simpson, 2010).

Mike Rubin, the Training Coordinator whose service to the Smithsonian started eleven years ago as a volunteer, has continued volunteering, but this time for the National Parks Service and for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. According to him, "Being a volunteer makes me a better volunteer manager," because it allows him to keep abreast of current issues for volunteers, and provides a deeper appreciation for what volunteers go through (M. Rubin, personal communication, August 22, 2012). He may not have been consciously aware of it, but such practices are part of why volunteers stay (Eisner, Grimm Jr., Maynard, & Washburn, 2009). The presence of volunteers, fully trained and eminently capable, should help to enable the Smithsonian in obtaining its vision of a Smithsonian that "will be an Institution that fulfills its vast potential to serve the nation and the world."

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