

**Improving Volunteer Training Quality
in the Science Undergraduate Society**

for

Dr. Erika Paterson

Technical Writing Instructor

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, B. C.

by

Kevin Gonzalez

English 301 Student

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Abstract

Introduction

The Science Undergraduate Society (SUS) hosts many events throughout the school year to cater to all undergraduate students in the Faculty of Science. These events require many volunteers to be hired and trained in a short amount of time by fellow students known as Human Resources (HR) Coordinators. The society's main events are: Science RXN, an orientation event that welcomes new-to-UBC Science students; First Week (begins at the start of first term) and Science Week (begins at the start of second term), a week of daily events with the goal of welcoming Science students to the new term.

Considering that volunteers are trained in this organization are trained by full-time students, this can cause conflict with time sensitive scenarios. If volunteers are not hired and trained adequately before these events, this can cause many volunteer responsibilities shift towards the planning committee members which then reduces the quality of experience that volunteers would receive and add additional stress to committee members. While each year has been greatly successful thanks to the volunteers, there is potential to improve the quality of how they are trained and what they are able to take away from their experience.

There is a need of a structure to train volunteers in the Science Undergraduate Society. Each year the responsibility of volunteer training falls on the SUS Human Resources Coordinators, where the students in those roles change annually. The standards and how new volunteers are trained will vary year to year and with a need for a structure to train volunteers, those new to the Human Resources role with limited experience in student leadership may struggle. This may lead to the unintended sub-optimal training of volunteers.

One possible solution to improve the quality of volunteer opportunities in this organization is to develop a comprehensive volunteer program that includes guidelines to applications, interviews, hiring, training, walking through general event expectations/scenarios, and post-event debriefing. Creating this program provides a reliable structure for the hiring and training of potential volunteers from the Human Resources Coordinators of the Science Undergraduate Society. This will result in efficient time management of the hiring and training process, a platform where the quality of volunteers is consistent over several years, and will provide an environment where volunteers can flourish under the guidance of senior student leaders.

Identifying how current training practices can be improved should be directed by the volunteers being trained and adjusted, put into action by those responsible for implementing the training program. This report aims to address these key questions:

1. How have volunteers been trained over the past five years in this organization?
2. What about current volunteer training in this organization can be improved?
3. What methods have other organizations at UBC used to improve the quality of volunteer opportunities?
4. Are methods from other organizations feasible for volunteer training in the Science Undergraduate Society?
5. Will a general volunteer hiring and training program be well-received? If not, how can it be adjusted to be more volunteer and executive-friendly?

To help identify improvements to current training practices, surveys directed to the volunteers, interviews with executive members of the Science Undergraduate Society and

Senior Orientation Leaders from UBC Orientations. This report analyzes the information gathered from the survey, interviews, and literature pertaining to student leadership. The analysis examines how current volunteer training practices can be improved, proposing solutions and determining the viability of these solutions, which aims to benefit the skills that volunteers take away from their experience.

Data Section

Current Hiring and Training Practices

Application and interview. Currently, volunteers in the Science Undergraduate Society apply for their position by an online application. The application obtains information of the applicant's personality focused on motivation, transferrable skills, and creativity, which were assessed by the HR Coordinators in relation to what is needed of the volunteers. Over the past two years, applicants were assessed on a points-based system with supporting comments which was implemented to reduce bias. After the application process, all applicants are invited for a group interview.

The group interview portion consists of standard interview questions, followed by a situational question, then creative questions, and lastly a group skit. The situational questions assess what the individual plans to do in each scenario related to the event. For example, the applicant may be asked to go through what he or she would do to integrate people being left out in a group. The creative questions are a way to assess an individual's problem solving. Often problems out of one's control may arise and being able to logically think through the situation and come to a solution is a vital skill. Lastly, the group skit is the part where individuals show

how they can work in a team, simulating the stress that may be present during the event as applicants are being interviewed and competing with peers for a position. Like the application, applicants are also given a score with supporting comments.

Applicants are then hired as volunteers in descending total score based on the application and interview. The application is weighed less than the interview and the decision for all applicants to be interviewed assumed that individuals may be able to express themselves more fully through writing than verbally. That said, the interview also carries more weight because it targets key aspects, that are, performance under pressure and teamwork. The total score is based on a rubric which serves as a guide to assess applicants but with HR Coordinators changing annually, the rubric will vary year to year based on what the Human Resource Coordinators are looking for. Reflecting on the whole process thus far, this means that also the application, interview question, and hiring process will vary.

Hiring Effects on Training. But how does the hiring process affect volunteers when their role first starts when they arrive to the training session? The answer is that HR Coordinators spend enormous amounts of time designing the application and what should the application target. Furthermore, designing the interview questions based on what HR Coordinators are looking for in a volunteer for the event. On top of that work, they are reading hundreds of applications, conducting interviews on several days, finalizing volunteer rosters, assisting with committee duties, and writing emails to applicants. Clearly, there is a large time commitment and solutions to make the process more efficient should be considered as this would take away time for designing the training program for volunteers.

Volunteer training. The following describes the current training session for the volunteers. Volunteers arrive in the morning of the training day and check-in to the training venue. At the designated start time, the HR Coordinators commence the training, starting with icebreakers. These icebreakers serve as a way for the committee and volunteers to get to know each other, feel comfortable, and start the day on a positive note. Afterwards, the HR Coordinators start with an introduction of themselves, the event committee, and what the event is. Consequently, expectations of the volunteers during training and during the event are established at this time. Volunteers are asked to help with setup and clean up, and be a campus resource for others. A campus resource meaning someone knowledgeable about what is on campus and if someone needs direction, he or she can direct the person to the appropriate place. Training continues with contact and First Aid information and then a detailed walkthrough of the itinerary of the event. Lunch is then served with scenario specific training followed where volunteers are organized into groups. The purpose of this scenario specific training is to provide volunteers with scenarios that may occur during the day of the event. Specifically, this portion is done in groups performing a skit to visualize what could occur. By the end of this portion, volunteers are free to socialize as the training session is complete.

Survey Results and Interview

Volunteer Survey. Given these current training practices, past and present volunteers over the past two years were surveyed based on their experience from training. Out of 43 volunteers that have participated in the following survey of a scale from 1 to 5, 45% of which have indicated that the training time was too long and 55% of volunteers felt indifferent about the volunteer time. In terms of hospitality, many volunteers (80%) felt that hospitality met their

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needed whereas 20% felt indifferent about the hospitality. The rest of the questions asked were related to enjoyment of volunteer training, preparedness of the volunteer and HR coordinators, likely to volunteer again, satisfaction of HR availability, and personal rewarding. An overwhelming majority felt that the HR coordinators were very well prepared during training (89%) and similarly, volunteers felt that they were also prepared or very well prepared for training as well (89%). Interestingly, the data shows a similar trend regarding likely to volunteer where 77% felt strongly about volunteering again next year, 78% were very satisfied with HR availability from hiring until the end of the event, and 73% felt that the overall experience was rewarding; however, there appeared to be a larger spread regarding volunteer training where 15% did not feel it was enjoyable, 25% felt indifferent, and 60% did enjoy training.

Volunteers were also given the opportunity to express what specifically could be improved in training for a better experience and what could either be added or removed. Commonly, many volunteers indicate that going over the itinerary was extremely long and uninteresting. It was noted that because the itinerary was posted in the volunteer manual, it would have been more useful to briefly go over it and highlight main points rather than go into the details of the day itself. That said, some volunteers offered suggestions to make training more enjoyable such as more interaction between volunteers and more practice and preparation for each part of the day which in turn making it more engaging and active. A few volunteers have also suggested a social before the event, during the summer where many volunteers are free and can socialize and develop relationships in a more natural setting. Conclusively, the survey results were mainly positive where many students felt prepared and

did not take issue with the HR Coordinators running the training but rather the format and engagement of training.

Interview with SUS VP Internal. Taking the survey results into account, the VP Internal of the Science Undergraduate Society, Julia Wu, in charge of hiring the HR Coordinators was asked about improving training. Ms. Julia Wu feels that all volunteers should be motivated, dedicated, and have a willingness to try new things and should be exhibited during training and especially during the event. If she were to run the training session, a brief introduction is necessary to make volunteers comfortable and gain an understanding of their involvement. Past the introduction, warm-up activities are included for volunteers to present themselves to the group and move into activities that interact with other people. These interactive activities should be guided with a prompt where they can share their thoughts freely, fostering an environment where everyone can learn from each other. She stresses that these prompts should also be specific to the role and scenarios that they are likely to be involved in which aims to develop knowledge and confidence in their role. This provides the opportunity to work in groups and making volunteers think for their own as it is important for her that volunteers also have a voice, to create discussion rather than a lecture. In Julia's experience as a camp leader, she suggests that team bonding is important so that everyone feels included in the larger community and developing trust in others, results in openness and a willingness to rely on each other. Like a volunteer has suggested, a social would also be beneficial to promoting inclusivity. It is important that volunteers should also feel appreciated, and making sure they have a voice, and to build a time and space where they can feel supported.

From an HR Coordinator point of view, Julia Wu envisions that the HR Coordinators are a figure that is both approachable and knowledgeable, able to act but lenient to let volunteers express their own style of leadership. Generally, HR Coordinators can also be checking in with volunteers in a positive and casual way rather than a mandatory meeting, as that would provide an environment where volunteers can freely express themselves. As the current HR Coordinators will be changed next year, there is a need for a standard for hiring and training volunteers; however, Julia argues that while a standardized system is good to put in place to ensure volunteers have all necessary skills, it may hurt their experience in the long run as their leadership style would likely not be expressed. Rather than a standardized system, she suggests that a transition program will benefit both the HR Coordinators and volunteers instead. This transition program might include a meeting between the incoming and outgoing HR Coordinators to see what worked well, improvements, differences, and expectations. Also, including a transition report with content from the past years to help give the HR Coordinators ease into their role and how the incoming HR Coordinators decide to run their hiring and training is up to their interpretation.

UBC Orientations methods. Current Senior Orientation and Orientation Leaders from UBC Orientations were asked of the most effective training methods from their experience as part of UBC Orientations. UBC Orientations largely focuses on Imagine Day where new-to-UBC students are welcomed by staff and student leaders. Of the Senior Orientation Leaders that were asked, they agreed that discussing possible scenarios that may happen, creating a solution to the problem, and acting the scenario out was effective (Li and Kim). In general, small group discussion felt most effective as other student leaders were able to share their thoughts and

hear what others thought about it, and to also hear other leaders point of view where one might not have considered a point that was brought up when thinking alone (Li and Kim). It may also feel easier to get ideas across and getting opinions from others much more quickly. An introduction to the Orientation Leader role was helpful in focusing what to expect and consider in this role, such as, being supportive of incoming students, or being more considerate of other student’s backgrounds (Leung). Having these thoughts prior to Imagine Day helped identify and become familiar with the Orientation Leader position in terms of responsibilities, actions, and ways to approach students as a personal or first connection to UBC (Leung).

Proposed Solution to Improving Volunteer Training Quality

Considering the current training practices, and improvements suggested by volunteers, other organizations, and the VP Internal of the Science Undergraduate Society, the following proposal to improve volunteer training quality is as followed and visualized in Figure 1.

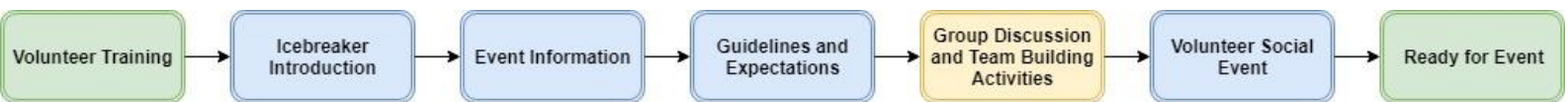


Figure 1. Flowchart of proposed volunteer training in the Science Undergraduate Society.

Discussion-based training. Related strictly to the training session, the current practices of having icebreaker games to start make volunteers feel comfortable and acquainted with each other will remain. Followed by information about the event, guidelines and expectations, and all the important logistical details such as First Aid and contact information. To address the length of time and improvements that volunteers have suggested, a detailed explanation of the itinerary will be substituted with a brief overview of the itinerary and small group discussions with prompts relating to possible scenarios that would occur during the event and team

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building activities. These group discussions would be held in groups of around six people with the HR Coordinators and Event Committee members facilitating discussion or the activities. The change to this format will increase training enjoyment for volunteers, making them more engaged and active in the training, giving them the opportunity to express themselves. The training session is then followed by a social event on a separate date with all volunteers as Julia Wu and several volunteers have pointed out. The purpose of the social is to bring camaraderie between volunteers, create excitement, and make all people involved feel included in the larger Science community.

Past the training session, rather than a standardized format to hiring and training volunteers for HR Coordinators initially proposed, a transition program will be more beneficial in facilitating student leadership for both executives and volunteers, allowing more time for the HR Coordinators to focus on volunteer directed initiatives. This transition program will include an archive of past applications, interview questions, training files, and other important documents where incoming HR Coordinators can refer to as a guideline but in no way, required to follow what past HR Coordinators as developing their own leadership style is greatly encouraged. Additionally, a meeting between the incoming and outgoing HR Coordinators facilitated by the incoming and outgoing SUS VP Internal to establish improvements, difficulties, and an understanding of the HR Coordinator role in unison with the SUS VP Internal, and setting goals for volunteers. The proposed transition program aims to act as a guideline for the incoming HR Coordinators to lead through their own style and to encourage volunteers to grow into a leadership role based on their leadership style.

Assessment of solution. The proposed solution above is both feasible and implementable as it is cost-efficient requiring minimal funds for the training session to gather materials for discussion and activities. The transition program also aims to target longevity with meetings to establish common ground and references from past years to build on, making a strong effort to improve training quality past the proposed solution of making training more engaging through discussion. However, while the suggested improvements to training and implementation of a transition program as both the SUS VP Internal and SUS VP Student Life have noted, it is very dependent on the incoming and outgoing VP Internal and HR Coordinators. Julia Wu, SUS VP Internal, is hopeful that connection between the two parties does occur in the future but Gurshabad Singhera, SUS VP Student Life, is doubtful citing that the outgoing parties may not feel as passionately as the incoming parties which could lead to unproductive meetings. To address this, a transition report would also be included in the archive in cases of unproductive meetings or other factors that would not allow the two parties to connect. In theory, the improvement of training towards more discussion-based and implementation of a transition program will greatly benefit HR Coordinators to focus on training volunteers resulting in an enriching experience for volunteers.

Benefits of Improving Student Leadership

Professional and personal development. Student leadership in university consists of interactions between students, professors, engagement in university and class activities (Mozghan *et al.* 2011). There is a debate between if whether leaders are born, or leaders are made (Zekan *et al.* 2012); however, Mozghan *et al.* (2011) agree that developing leaders during their time as a student, especially in university, is important in finding new leaders in society. By

improving volunteer quality in the Science Undergraduate Society, which gives the opportunity for students to grow into new leadership roles, it is important to identify the benefits of involvement in student leadership opportunities. Hilliard (2010) describes the personal benefits as increased ownership and responsibilities, facilitating the personal growth of their peers, increased understanding of self and others, clarification of personal values, and interest in developing leaders outside of campus. Additionally, Hilliard (2010) describes the professional benefits as improved problem solving and decision making, two-way communication, program planning and implementation, report writing, and logistical coordination. Aymoldanovna (2015) summarizes the foundational leadership qualities as the ability to inspire, motivate, act, and structure with creativity, high standard for performance, and the will to succeed to be found in all leaders. A summary of the development and qualities obtained are visualized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Development and qualities gained from student leadership.

Mentorship. An interesting point to take is how student leadership affects mentorship. Mentorship is the guidance provided by a person that is experienced in the field of interest.



Hine (2017) articulates that university students involved in a leadership role have shifted to a

leadership style that engaged with others, a collaborative effort. Through a collaborative effort, a common goal can be established within a group that all can work toward to and while it is a team-orientated goal, the leader's role is to facilitate discussion to achieve that team's goal (Aymoldanovna et al. 2005). One example of student leadership and mentorship on the UBC campus is through the Orientation Leader program, where an Orientation Leader serves as a mentor for incoming students (Li and Kim). The role of the Orientation Leader is to develop connections between new-to-UBC students in a small group, while also serving as a resource during their first term at UBC (Li and Kim). The goal of the Orientation Leader for the new-to-UBC students is that the students can support each other but is there to step in when needed (Li and Kim).

Conclusion

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

Current volunteer training practices need improvement as noted by volunteer who have given their feedback. Generally, their main concerns were length of time and engagement of the training. Understandably, because the training session was not as engaging as volunteers would have hoped for, the amount of time for the training session seemed long and uneventful. Given the feedback and interviews, one training method that was effective was small group discussions. These discussions are beneficial for training as it provides different opinions, points of view, and acts as a learning tool between leaders. Additionally, to focus on improving the training program more time needs to be allocated which calls for the efficient time usage of the HR Coordinators. With HR Coordinators being changed annually, a transition is needed to ease them into the role which includes a transition meeting between the incoming and outgoing HR

Coordinators and SUS VP Internal. Overall, the benefit of improving volunteer training quality leads to better student leaders in which they can improve both personally and professionally as well as act as mentors to their peers wanting to become leaders themselves.

Recommendations

If you are interested in improving the quality of training for volunteers, consider these suggestions:

1. Keeping an open line of communications between yourself and volunteers. Making volunteers feel appreciated for their work and input can go a long way in improving their satisfaction.
2. Before implementing the suggested improvements, consider talking to UBC staff in the Centre for Student Involvement and Careers for a professionally approved program or advice on further improving volunteer training.
3. Initiating the proposed solution earlier than later. With ever changing schedules and responsibilities, it is important to make time to implement changes to create success.

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