What do we look for when academics send out volunteers and interns, and what do community organizations seek from interns and volunteers.

Simenz: How many people here work with interns and volunteers? [Most of the room raised hands.]

I started at Marquette ten years ago in exercise science, and my first task was to find a site for internships for 55 exercise physiology students. And my only experience with internships was being an intern, and my experiences weren’t very good. I didn’t know what I needed to do to provide the interns and the communities with a good experience.

What I learned early on was that internships are a two-way process. Interns and volunteers are gaining something and also giving something back, in a reciprocal process.

Cox: One thing to remember is the two terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Interns come from an academic institution and the internship is a part of their course of study. Volunteers have a variety of ways that they’ll help the agency, from an hour a week to special projects over the weekend.

The last two years have not been kind to nonprofit agencies. The economy hurt corporations and foundations that normally fund these agencies. It’s even more critical to be able to rely on interns and volunteers. We can’t afford to have full time staff all the time. We can’t afford to take program dollars away. It’s critical that we have volunteers and interns, and the first thing is it’s like a mirror: what they’re looking for is what we need, and what we need is what they’re looking for. It’s a good match, but we need to make sure people know what they’re getting into.

Simenz: I want to talk about some of the simple things that we look for when we’re looking for interns. And on the other side is a mirror of that. Can anybody give me a perspective on what you’re looking for when volunteers come in to your organization?

Participant: One of those things is leading activities. That’s my most urgent need. There’s also paperwork and answering phones.

Participant: The ideal internship in our agency would enable the student to incorporate the experience as part of a capstone project or graduate thesis of some sort, making the experience part of the education experience.

Simenz: I want to come back to that later in the talk.

Participant: We have some interns that do rotations with physicians. But I think we underutilize interns for outreach activities, and things that don’t happen every day but where we still need some manpower.
Simenz: That’s a great point, and gets to the difference between volunteers and interns. One thing we have in academia is expertise. We’ve got students that have certain levels of expertise in these areas that community organizations can tap into. I’m working on a grant process, and part of that dealt with editing a video. And I thought, “We can tap into student help to do that. There are interns that may have that skill and experience.”

When it comes to volunteers, people that seek you out, you can’t as easily control the areas of expertise that they share. You need to engage them where they fit best, and for areas where you need labor but not necessarily a technical skill.

Cox: The program at Marquette with the Trinity Fellows, they do a match based on background. And they find that they get high level expertise from the fellows, most of the time they are reporting directly to the Executive Director with a specific project. We’ve had Trinity Fellows create a new program for the organization. And, they become a senior member of the team while they’re there. There’s a value to that. I’ve hired two of the last Trinity Fellows we’ve had. We could never pay them a market rate for those projects, but by paying a stipend to offset the costs to Marquette, we can employ them, and it’s a good example of a formalized internship.

Simenz: When we get beyond technical skills, interns have a real interest in serving the community. Whether it’s working with seniors, students are looking to get involved. At Marquette, one of the pillars is service, so we have students who are very interested in that.

But I’m going to place a large caveat there. My students typically have a generalized interest in community service, but they don’t always know what that means. Most of my students are middle and upper class and Caucasian, and have very little central city experience. They don’t know what that means in reality, that there are differences. I send students out consistently to Neighborhood House, YMCA and the Milwaukee Public Schools. And every year someone comes back to me with eyes as wide as saucers saying “I don’t know what I signed up for!” Students get used to the reality of the city. And I hope that the community centers understand that this is a learning experience. Part of what they need is exposure to communities that are different than what they’ve grown up with their whole lives. It’s not always the smoothest transition.

Cox: You have to look past the presumptions and the stereotypes. A Trinity Fellow was coming from Washington DC. And he was flying in and told me he was going to catch a cab to Neighborhood House, and he got in the cab and the driver said, “Are you sure you want to go there?” And of course he said, “Yeah, are you going to take me there or not?” He was able to deal with it, but the misconception about where Neighborhood House is—you have a very diverse population—and you have people living and walking in the neighborhood. It’s that mix, to understand that people do coexist, and it’s not always like how it is on the news, where all you see are negative stories without understanding that a community is dynamic. And no matter where you are you can have an issue or a problem.

Simenz: What I’d like to ask briefly is what are some of the biggest challenges that you face recruiting and training interns?
Participant: I always tend to shy away from interns, because I’m afraid I’m going to spend all this time training them, and then they’re going to be there for a semester and then they’re going to leave.

Simenz: It’s a great question, and it’s a balance that has to be struck. We’ll talk towards the end about some strategies to make it as equitable as possible. But that’s very difficult, because typically interns are students. Though internships can lead to employment and long-standing employment.

A third strategy here, a third thing that interns have to offer is energy and enthusiasm. You’re remiss if you’re not harnessing the energy and enthusiasm that interns have to offer. Our students are always excited to use the skills that they have to try and make a difference.

Cox: And it’s not just students, it’s volunteers. People who may be are retired. It essentially deals with refugees in the international learning center. People with little or no education and people who are not literate. So there’s a lot of tutoring going on. One is a retiree from Quarles and Brady. The people bring a commitment, they bring enthusiasm, and a desire to do something outside themselves, and their reward is seeing they actually help somebody.

Simenz: Volunteers are there for one reason only, that they want to make a difference in the community. That’s as noble and altruistic as it can get. So what do volunteers hope to gain? Wanting to make a difference in the community. Interns have a little bit of a different experience, they want to get something in return, it’s a learning experience. They want to develop professionalism skills. A strong suggestion I have is, think for a moment about what your facility offers that’s unique in the way of experience. That’s especially true if you’re competing for people to come to you.

Milwaukee Center for Independence, we’ve sent student there doing exercise programming. And MCFI houses people who need hands-on exercise programming. Neighborhood house has children and young adults from a variety of communities who are looking for programming and people to engage them. And our students are really thrilled to do that. So take a resource inventory of your center, and what your center can offer to students.

Cox: As an example, Neighborhood House has a nature center. And part of what we do is harvesting of maple sugar. And there are a lot of volunteers that are into the environment and nature who are interested in doing that. It’s a long drive, but it’s one of those more popular activities, it’s sort of an annual activity. Some will only volunteer for that, and that’s fine.

We had another project building a playground, and we didn’t have to pay to have that built. There’s a variety of things that volunteers can get involved in. Rehabbing, painting, those are things that volunteers love to do. There’s always a need for the skilled trades in any facility.

Let it be known what it is you need for your agency, because families will come and volunteer for special spring cleaning. It’s amazing what they’ll do.

Simenz: Communication is essential, from both perspectives. You need to let people know what you need! If you can put together a one-page bullet pointed sheet with some of the areas of need that you have, it would go a long way to help people match up their experience and expertise with what you
need. I have my students create a list of ten goals. They need to research the site and create a list of 10 goals they would like to achieve, and present that to their site supervisor, and discuss whether they are realistic and reasonable. If they are not, they revise them with their site supervisor. So I think always discussing your needs, putting them out there. I have students that speak Spanish, and are looking for entry into the Spanish speaking community, but don't know how to get there. So if you can put the word out to academic partners and volunteer organizations, we can match you with skilled workers that can meet those needs.

Additionally, the last thing I want to talk about is flexibility and patience. In this era it’s difficult to exercise those things. The resources people have to get these things done are really limited. Our students come in completely unprepared for what they’re going to see in the real world. It’s not their fault, they’re still students. So we try to help them by making them aware that there are contexts that are different from their own. And that process takes time. They struggle sometimes.

It’s far too often that I will get a call that says “your student is not doing anything” and a lot of time that’s blamed on laziness. And sometimes it is, but sometimes it’s a lack of confidence. Students can grow and overcome these things, but it’s a process that all sides need to be aware of. They’re stepping into what they consider foreign territory.

What we hope students are doing is engaging community leaders so that they can communicate what they’re feeling. It’s not always time effective, but it’s an essential part of the steps. Even five minutes talking with them might make a world of difference.

Cox: The upfront investment is well worth it, because you avoid some of those issues. You have someone that really wants to get involved. It’s good to get to know each other before you get going with your commitment, because that right fit makes it really worthwhile. If you have the luxury of having someone be able to take a day or two to get a feel for that person and they get a feel for you, you get a higher level of trust, so you can notice and nurture the student, and so the student feels they can come to you, so they don’t fall into that depression, or that area where they back off and feel less engaged. Volunteers, you usually don’t have that issue, because they select you. With volunteers what’s important is consistency, making sure you follow up with them. It’s nice to say thank you, and keep the lines of communication open. But with interns you really want to make sure it’s a match, because they’re going to be engaging in something a little more critical to the mission.

Simenz: I’d like for those of you that work in community settings to create a brief needs analysis.

- What do you need? What are you looking for from interns and volunteers? What’s most important?
- Number two, can you brainstorm at your table, ways that interns and volunteers might be able to meet these needs?
- And number three, this is the hard part, can you think of a project, or some sort of organized way to get that intern or volunteer involved.

From the academic perspective:
• What do your students need? What are they looking for? Other than skills, think holistically, a larger perspective.
• Number two, what would be good target placements for your student as a result of those needs?
• Number three, what would your evaluation look like? A project? A questionnaire? Do you need tangible evidence that they’re successful?

Simenz: Would anyone like to share?

Participant: I’m getting an intern this summer, and I’m concerned about overburdening, and I don’t want to underutilize them. I think first of all I should meet her and see what her skills are. I think I should give her some suggestions of the things I need done, and try to prioritize them. I’ll have her June through August, and we can see how much we can accomplish. I don’t want to overburden her. I mean it is her summer...

Simenz: You talked about wanting an intern, talking about what you have to offer. You’ve got a list of goals and priorities. You talked about what Richard said, meeting that student and communicating. It’s exactly what we were talking about. Anybody else? Anybody come up with a surprising thought about what you have to offer interns?

Participant: Not so much interns but volunteers. We work with people living in public housing. There’s the concern that many volunteers want to come in and help. But many times they want to come in and help one time. People don’t need more help, they just need more long term—and that’s the hardest thing with volunteers is getting that long term. With an intern you have them for a semester or a full year. A one-time is great for a physical thing, but if it’s relationships with people, that’s a hard thing. People don’t want to come every week. Or if they do, they burn out. Internships are easier on both sides.

Cox: Not every volunteer should be allowed to volunteer. They may do more harm than good. You may need to figure out a diplomatic way to let them get involved in the agency. You’re not going to change the world. Just be clear with them up front so they have a clear picture of what’s involved. You have to be very strict with screening the volunteers. Depending on the needs it might be more than they wanted to sign up for.

Simenz: That speaks to the need to clearly communicate what you’re looking for exactly. So you might attract someone who’s more interested in what you’re looking for.

Participant: We have an intern who’s coming in, and he has a certain skill set, where he has to squeeze in what he’s supposed to do, but trying not to squelch an enthusiasm and skill set that he also has, how do we help them use that?

Simenz: That’s hard, it takes time and attention from the site.

Cox: Interns can become volunteers. They can do their academic component and then also volunteer.
Simenz: A couple of quick key take home points. You need to communicate with your volunteers. Meet with your interns and volunteers before hand, talk about your goals and make sure they match. And understand it’s a learning process.