

Expect More Profile

Title: Summer Volunteer Squads at the Arlington Heights Memorial Library

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Expect More Chapter Link: Chapter 6: Communities: Expect a Platform

Link to Profile (if applicable): n/a

Tweetable Profile Description: More than “little librarians,” teen volunteers use AHML as platform to develop skills & give back to community in & outside the library.

Institutional Profile: Arlington Heights Memorial Library, serving a Chicago suburb with about 76,000 residents and about 10,000 teens.

Service Description:

Arlington Heights Memorial Library (AHML) took a marked shift in its approach to teen services in 2013. That spring, they unveiled a new teen-only enclosed space in the library called “the HUB.” And that summer, they also launched Summer Volunteer Squads (SVS), replacing Junior Library Volunteers (JLV) as the new teen summer volunteer program. Both the HUB and SVS are innovative approaches to provide teens with a platform to learn, create, share, and engage with one another. The HUB has space for collaborative studying, a DIY craft area, a gaming area, a row of computers, and various other technology and tools at their disposal. For the most part, teens are left to their own devices inside the HUB, and it is important for them to have this “incubator” space. SVS then takes this a step further, finding ways to connect the knowledge, skills, and passions present in the “incubator” and sharing them with the broader community. In this way, teens become a part of the library’s collection of resources that can be harnessed in service of the library’s mission.

I interviewed Lynne Priest, Grade School Programming Specialist, and Trixie Dantis, Teen Services Supervisor, in April 2017 for this profile. Lynne has been involved in SVS from its inception and was also involved in the previous JLV for many years. Trixie led her first SVS squad in 2014 and has helped administer the program ever since. Both Lynne and Trixie stated that teen volunteerism is strong in the Arlington Heights community and that SVS was a way to better harness the enthusiasm by providing more meaningful, impactful volunteer opportunities. During the JLV years, there often weren’t enough tasks in the library for the number of teens who wanted to volunteer and teens would complain of being bored during their volunteer shifts. So staff began to discuss ways of evolving and expanding the program. Inspired by a similar program at Oak Park Public Library (OPPL), they presented the idea for SVS to the AHML Board of Trustees and, under the guidance of then-Youth Services Manager Amber Creger, charged full-steam ahead. This included meeting with OPPL staff to get tips on launching and running the program.

One point of emphasis was the importance of getting buy-in from leadership in order to make a program like this successful. The biggest cost associated with running SVS is staff time, so managers must be on board with the program in order for staff to be able to allocate time to it.

This is especially true if staff from multiple departments are recruited to lead squads, which is something that AHML began doing after the first year. Doing so broadens the kinds of squads that can be offered, by tapping into a more diverse array of skill sets and interests. For example, staff from AHML's Digital Services department have led a squad that used coding to build websites and a squad that utilized the library's studio equipment to produce music; staff from the Genealogy department led a squad that contributed artifacts for the local history museum. It also helps to spread staff time across different departments, so that the full burden of staff resources doesn't fall on a single department. For this reason, the types of squads offered are based heavily on staff interest. As Trixie indicated in our interview, programs tend to be most successful when the people leading them are passionate about them.

Nevertheless, within the staff-designed squads themselves, teens are handed the reins. For example, in the squad that I will be co-leading this summer, Biblio Buddies, we will be going to the backstretch of the Arlington International Racecourse where migrant workers and their families live temporarily. The squad will travel out to the backstretch once a week with the bookmobile to provide books, tech, and planned activities for the children of the migrant workers. Though I will be there to guide and supervise, the teens will be the ones planning and leading the activities. Most of the migrant workers are native Spanish speakers, so we aim to recruit teens who speak Spanish and/or have taken Spanish classes. This is an excellent example of the library as a platform bringing together patrons' unique skills (the ability to speak Spanish) to fulfill an unmet need in the community (library services to migrant workers).

Once there is buy-in from library leadership and staff are identified to lead squads, the next challenge is to get buy-in from the teens. There is a written application that asks teens to select their top 3 squad choices and to describe their skills, experiences, and interests, followed by an interview with an AHML staff member. This process serves several purposes. First, it gives teens experience with a low-stakes job application scenario, preparing them for future employment. It also conveys that participation entails a higher level of commitment and responsibility than drop-in programs in the library. And it allows AHML staff to have a conversation with the teens about the different squads in order to assure that they are placed in a squad that will best utilize their skills. Sometimes teens think they want a certain squad as their first pick, based on the written description in the brochure, but when they hear more about each of the squads and talk through it with a staff member, they often change their minds. Once placed in a squad, however, Lynne stated that no volunteer has ever asked to switch squads, which seems to indicate that the process has worked fairly well.

Each year, there are about a dozen squads to choose from. About 50% of teens choose "Traditionalists," the squad that does the traditional in-library volunteering that was typical of the original JLV program. Lynne stated that this squad remains the most popular likely primarily due to the flexibility of the scheduling. Traditionalists can choose from a variety of times throughout the day (morning, afternoon, and evening) and do not have to come at the same time each week, nor even necessarily come every week, so long as they complete a certain number of total hours. All of the other squads, however, meet at a set day and time every week, usually during the day.

At the end of the program, volunteers complete a survey asking them to evaluate their volunteer experience. These responses then help inform squad choices and improvement of the overall program for the following year. For example, though the Traditionalists still do traditional library tasks, based on survey responses, that squad has now been restructured to facilitate more creativity and leadership skills. Rather than merely handing the Traditionalist volunteers a laundry-list of tasks, they are given a project that they will have to plan and execute, depending on need and interest. Projects range from designing crafts for kids to developing a podcast.

This holds true for all the Summer Volunteer Squads. Teens are expected to take leadership. Rather than the library providing services to teens, SVS provides a platform for teens to use their unique passions and skills to contribute to the broader community. It is an excellent example of the innovative ways libraries can improve society when we expect more from them.

Link(s) to Service (if applicable): n/a (AHML website with information on SVS is only live for the month that applications are accepted)

Usage Data (if applicable): ~200 teen volunteers and ~1,000 total service hours each summer

Related Resources:

1. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-05-01/news/ct-tl-arlington-heights-hub-teen-center-20130502_1_hub-teens-tables
2. <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2016/08/summer-volunteer-squad-offers-creative-options/>
3. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/arlington-heights/news/ct-ahp-library-sprout-squad-tl-0825-20160817-story.html>
4. <https://tinkergroup.wordpress.com/2017/03/13/teen-summer-volunteer-squads/>
5. <http://yalsa.ala.org/blog/2016/11/14/yalsa-2016-symposium-the-double-bottom-line/>
6. https://localwiki.org/arlington-heights/Local_History_Hunters
7. <https://soundcloud.com/hub500/sets/sound-hounds-music-themes>