Transitioning from Service to Outreach: Leveraging Student Activities with the Working World

By James Chandler Cunningham

This is the second of three articles summarizing Student Career and Professional Development Day at the 2013 Annual Meeting. The theme of the day was transitions. Panelists represented both recent graduates and successful professionals from universities, industry, and government agencies.

Getting the most out of being a student is not easy. It can be difficult, time-consuming, and confusing trying to figure out which actions help achieve the most from an education. Even if the classwork, homework, and studying feel perfect, it always seems like something is missing and more can be done. Students join professional organizations, participate in university clubs and student chapters, and volunteer for anything and everything! But upon graduation, the obvious question remains: What now?

Luckily for new graduates, many who have faced the same question are more than willing to share their experiences and advice. The second panel of Student Career and Professional Development Day was created to help give professional advice to the imposing challenge of what to do. Panel chair Frank Lacson (Pacific Science and Engineering Group) and panelists Petra Alfred (Pacific Science and Engineering Group), Dan Nathan-Roberts (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and Shanqing “SQ” Yin (Changi General Hospital, Singapore) discussed how students can benefit professionally from their student service and volunteering.

Adaptation

Lacson started the panel by introducing the theme of adaptation, where one integrates volunteer activities as part of a global, personal plan. He noted that matching goals, constraints, and opportunities is a challenge, but successfully doing so and learning how to adapt in different situations is the most helpful skill in preparing for the future. Volunteering is great for learning how to adapt because it gives exposure to novel challenges. The main challenges described by the panelists can be separated into four groups:

1. learning to manage time
2. exposing oneself to mistakes
3. learning to network
4. learning how to get jobs.

Overcoming these hurdles inevitably leads to new opportunities for growth. Adaptation becomes easier from this growth and in turn allows a career path to develop from otherwise difficult situations.

Time Management

One big challenge volunteering offers is the opportunity to learn how to balance time. Lacson rated time as a person’s number-one resource. Because time is such a critical commodity, the panelists all mentioned ways volunteering can help foster time management. Alfred mentioned a perk of time management is being able to go the “extra mile,” which benefits students in the long run by providing new opportunities. She stressed the point that time becomes even more limited with more responsibilities, so it is beneficial to learn how to use time effectively early in one’s career. Yin advised students to make time to take opportunities to serve when they can. Students
should try not to decline opportunities to volunteer because, depending on where one works and lives, there may not be as many options to be exposed to new opportunities in the future. His example was that in Singapore, where work in human factors is almost nonexistent, he was the first person to volunteer to work on human factors issues in his hospital. Because he seized the opportunity to volunteer, he was able to write his own job description when a position became available at the hospital.

**Error Cycling**

A few of the panelists mentioned that by finding time to perform service and volunteer work, students have opportunities to make errors in low-stakes environments. Although this may sound undesirable at first, the panelists emphasized that the benefit of making mistakes is learning how to not make the same mistakes in the future when the stakes might be much higher. Nathan-Roberts called this process “accelerating the failure-cycle,” or in other words, “getting through all the hiccups as quickly as possible.” He stated that failure helps find and test upper limits, and only by experiencing slips and follies can solutions be found to overcome them in the future. Lacson agreed that volunteering is a great way to “seek mistakes” for this same reason. Later in the panel discussion, a graduate student asked for examples of learning from errors in volunteering. In response, Yin pointed out that any service and volunteering position provides the opportunities for learning how to maintain professionalism. Both Alfred and Nathan-Roberts said volunteering also allows students to explore different fields of HF/E. This can help students organize and focus their career path. Lacson said volunteering helps individuals to set realistic expectations because, “sometimes the mistake is internal… knowing when you’re expecting too much (or too little) from yourself and knowing when you’re expecting too much (or too little) from others.”

**Networking**

The importance of networking often pops up in talks about careers, but how often do networking opportunities arise? Volunteering exposes students to people, and in turn, challenges them to network. All of the panelists stressed to continue trying new methods of networking to create opportunities for employment, other challenges, and growth. An audience member asked the panelists how to start networking or finding opportunities to volunteer. The panelists offered the following suggestions:

- Join and participate in an HFES technical group
- Join and participate in other HF/E-related groups
- Go to local events inside and outside HF/E
- Join a [Meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) group
- Go to Ignite/TEDx talks or events
- Participate in professional organizations
- Put together your own panel session
- Talk to someone and ask them what their job entails and how to best prepare for it

**Getting a Job**

One of the more noticeable benefits of volunteering is setting oneself apart from others in the job market, not only by the skills learned while volunteering (how to work with or lead a group, how to stay organized, how to speak in front of people, etc.) but also by receiving job offers from the people for whom you volunteered. The panelists emphasized that most jobs in HF/E are found in untraditional ways. Collecting business cards from people you meet at conferences and sending them e-mails saying you were glad to have met them may open up opportunities for employment.
By volunteering, students are able to work with people who can guide them to jobs; they can also find mentors that can assist them in their careers. In regards to skills learned from volunteering, most of the panelists agreed that knowing the field in which you want to work helps attain the skills necessary to work in that field. These skills may help students stand out among other job applicants without such experience.

Do it!

Volunteer, because doing so gives you the abilities to adapt to the future. From volunteering comes the ability to know what your time is truly worth. By being exposed to the novel experiences and opportunities volunteering provides, mistakes can be dealt with and learned from. Volunteering also provides networking, which opens up opportunities for more volunteering as well as employment.

In their closing remarks, the panelists summed up their advice to students. Alfred advised students to step into volunteer work by knowing what you want and learning what volunteer positions have to offer. She advised students always to take initiative and let people know they are willing to do extra work. Nathan-Roberts stressed that graduate students are going to school to get a job and should volunteer accordingly. He emphasized that if students know what field they are entering, it helps to gain a depth of experience in volunteering related to that field. Yin said to “always step up to the plate [and] create your own opportunities,” because the opportunities that will help students grow the most may have to be created. Lacson advised to volunteer for “things you love and that will carry you very far.”

James Chandler Cunningham is a master’s student in the human factors program at California State University, Long Beach. He currently works in the Center for Human Factors in Advanced Aeronautics Technologies (CHAAT), where he helps ongoing research measuring human performance in complex systems, such as the Next Generation Airspace Transportation System (NextGen). Post-master’s, James plans to continue working in aerospace technologies; in particular, developing flight decks for spacecraft.

July

78th National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition July 7–10, 2014, Las Vegas, NV.

2014 Digital Societies and Social Technologies (DSST) Summer Institute July 8–10, 2014, Columbia, MO.


August

32nd International System Safety Conference August 1–10, 2014, St. Louis, MO.

122nd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association August 7–10, 2014, Washington, DC.
