

Reach Out to Reward and Recognize Volunteers

By Marissa Ill, Warrior Poetes (CT)



Congratulations! You've just spent months planning the hottest event your campus has ever seen—overcoming long hours, extra work, personality quirks and schedule changes. In recognition, you are honored for your leadership and esprit de corps with a genuine college-crested mug, which brings your coffee cup collection to about 15.

Boring!!

Not that you don't love your job, where you work, or the people you work with—but it's time for something fresh. Rewarding and recognizing volunteers is one of the greatest opportunities we have to break out of the "college is its own universe" mindset. There are resources all around us—local businesses, schools, civic groups, etc.—that not only can help reward volunteers, but allow you to continue the "pay it forward" or "go-give" model.

Relationship Matters

Despite massive media blitzes and advertising agendas that flash in front of and around each of us constantly (can you remember the last time it was quiet with no stimulation and you weren't in the library?), the real motivation for each volunteer is RELATIONSHIP—a sense of connection. They wouldn't give of their precious time, energy or ideas if they didn't feel connected—to the people, to the project, to the cause. Thinking outside the campus box opens you to see the community feels the same way. Business people want you to know you can count on them for service; restaurants hope you'll come in so they can impress you with their newest culinary delight; and many civic groups have dues and budgets specifically set aside for supporting projects or citizens who are building stronger communities.

Let's switch perspective: you own the best Thai restaurant a few blocks from XYZ College's Student Union Building. XYZ has always been a good customer base for you, and you intend for next semester to be no different. A student from the Office of, say, Diversity Initiatives, asks if you'd donate some food and a couple discount coupons or gift certificates to reward the planning committee for their World Fair Day. Would you:

- A) Run her out throwing noodles at her back?
- B) Say yes, you'd like to?
- C) Agree to donate either one or the other now, but tell them you'd love to do more again in the future?

Which sounds most likely? I have to tell you my personal experience has been B or C, and happily, never A.

Consider Your Resources

Where can you start? Like your favorite philosophy professor, I'll turn the question around—what do you have?

- **A phone book?** Flip through to see who's paid for ads. This shows they are doing more than just the minimum to get your attention, and you stand a good chance to be a liaison to exactly what they're looking for—future customers.
- **A car?** Drive through town and see who or what catches your eye. Every university has favorite spots in town and you'll definitely want to ask them for coupons or merchandise. A T-shirt or mug from "Moe's" is NOT the same as a T-shirt or mug from XYZ College. While we love XYZ, a gift from Moe's shows you went the extra mile and you really understand the experience of life on campus.
- **What else does the town around you have?** A YMCA or ballroom dance studio? How about free coupons for classes there? A volunteer might not have been able to fit kickboxing or samba lessons into their schedule this semester, but might be able to make it to one or two sessions off campus. A cool stationary store? A dry cleaner? A drive-thru? A drive-in? Computer store? Hair or nail salon? Massage therapist? Mechanic?

The goal is to start training yourself to see what the world is already offering you; the next step is to match it to your volunteers.

Drive through town and see who or what catches your eye. Every university has favorite spots in town and you'll definitely want to ask them for coupons or merchandise.

Know Your Volunteers

Who are your volunteers? How many do you have? What do they like? The answers to these questions will help you in your quest for unique "thank-you" gifts. If you know them well or if your task force is few in number, you may be able to get individualized gifts. If not, think BIG. Maybe a party with food donated from local groceries or restaurants will be a great group reward, and you might even get one of the college bands to perform. If Tuesday's are half-price movie nights at the local theatre, or 25-cent wing night at the local dive—GO! Make a big deal of it! Tell them this is in honor of them!

Often someone inside the group—or someone else you know—has a talent that can be showcased in honor of the amazing efforts of your team. If pictures are worth a thousand words, maybe you have a photographer among you who would make a photo documentary throughout the project and give each person a picture of themselves in a moment of glory. Any writers? How about a song, sonnet or haiku in honor of the group—print it, roll it with ribbon or

frame it. You can be as silly or serious as is appropriate for you—it's the "moment" you make that they'll appreciate. Don't discount a \$1 gift given with a million dollars' worth of praise and recognition. When it comes to rewards, it's all about them, but it doesn't have to break the bank.

Don't Forget the Freebies

And remember some things in life ARE FREE! Make crowns out of construction paper from the art department and have everyone meet for popcorn and donated soda. Once they're there, hand them each a crown on which you've written their name and a title for how they personally contributed to the success of the project. Caravan cars to the most beautiful spot around and have a ceremonial moment together before you each go your own way. Ask whoever you need to if you can paint one block of a campus walkway with the project title, project crew, date and success. Even if it stays only for that year, it's worth it for yourselves and for others to see what a little teamwork can do.

The World Is Your Treasure Chest

Building on the true spirit of volunteerism, everyone has something to contribute. As you enroll the community around you in your vision by allowing them the opportunity to thank those who did the real work, you create a win/win situation, plus you build your network of volunteer support. This is a great way for them to "advertise" to you and your

team, and it is also a phenomenal way for you to provide exquisite, fun and meaningful rewards! Although, in fact, your college may seem to be your whole world—there is a bigger one out there. And believe me, they offer a treasure chest of rewards and recognition for your volunteers.

About the Author

Marissa Ill is an entertainer, entrepreneur, humanitarian and philanthropist based in Connecticut. Touring nationally and internationally with her sisters in their band, **Warrior Poetes**, she has released three independent albums and developed her business and networking skills. Alongside their music, she and Warrior Poetes created a campus event called Hunger2Hope, which draws on the unique strengths of each university host to raise money and awareness for non-governmental organizations around the world through a dramatic and individual experience for each participant. A screenwriter, adventurer and director with Mary Kay skin care and color cosmetics, she graduated from Wheaton College (IL) with a bachelor's degree in communications and has studied at the American University of Paris (France) and Mary Washington College (VA), where she served on the Honor Council. Last year, Warrior Poetes joined NACA Northeast, participating in its regional conference, and the group returns this year as national members, attending the NACA Northeast and South regional conferences.



GET ON BOARD WITH NACA

WEST

SPOKANE, WA | NOVEMBER 8-11, 2007

NACA West Regional Conference
www.naca.org/NACA/Regions/West