Characteristics of Volunteer Work

Volunteering abroad is defined not so much by earnings, as it is by service and working to provide for unmet needs. These can encompass social, environmental, educational needs, as well as local lack of scarce skills. Today, volunteerism is seen as not only helping people, but helping persons or groups achieve their goals as they themselves define them, and building on self-reliance.

While volunteerism is focused on the needs of others, it also enriches the volunteer through friendships, knowledge of oneself, insight into another culture, and the relationship between our societies. For some, it can be a catalyst toward lifelong work for social change at home or abroad.

Motivations to volunteer abroad can vary, as this quote from from the book, Alternatives to the Peace Corps illustrates:

“Before making a commitment, it is important to clarify your motives. You may be drawn to voluntary service by a desire to help impoverished people. You may be interested in learning about culture and society. You may wish to be part of a process of positive social change. Or you may wish to gain experience which will help you find employment. Each of these motivations will direct you to distinct options for voluntary service.”

A book that we recommend to anyone who is considering volunteering in the developing world is How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas, whose authors guide you through a list of considerations to answer whether volunteering abroad is right for you.

**Skills required:** This runs the gamut from unskilled through professional, in areas such as teaching, business, health sciences, environment and natural resources, engineering and other technical skill areas, special education, those with skills in math and sciences, and many more.

**Time commitment:** From a few weeks to two or three years.

**Pay or cost:** Many volunteer positions provide room and board, but not transportation or personal expenses. Some require the volunteers to cover their own expenses. Others charge a fee if they provide training, onsite support or academic credit. These programs are usually less expensive (for a given location & duration) than study-only programs or personal travel. There are a few programs that are all expenses paid but they are long term programs (two or more years).

**Location and Type of Work:** There are volunteer opportunities virtually everywhere in the world. In
wealthier areas such as Western Europe (or the U.S.), volunteering may be the only way for non-specialists to work for social, educational, or environmental causes. In most countries with developing or transitional economies (broadly speaking, much of Africa and the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe) volunteering may be the only work possible for foreigners (excepting military service). These types of opportunities are advisable particularly for those seeking their first work experience in these locations. Development work of this type can also be great experience for pre-professional students—such as pre-med—for whom work of this type could actually be considered work or internship experience.

**Types of Organizations of Interest to Volunteers:** These include the U.S. government (i.e., the Peace Corps), large international multi-government organizations such as the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (known as NGOs), and religious organizations. The latter may have either a social-activist or traditional proselytizing-missionary orientation, or in some cases both.

**Special Volunteer Abroad Programs:** These types of programs provide the easiest and best method to volunteer abroad without professional skills. Volunteer-abroad programs provide placements and on-site support, charging fees to support these services as well as covering the living expenses of the volunteer. Volunteer abroad programs can be found through databases such as [www.goabroad.com](https://www.goabroad.com) [2], but we recommend that U-M students [contact our office](https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/about/contact) [3] to find out about programs that would be a good fit for them. For additional reading material see [Internship Resources/Volunteering](https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/abroad/swt/work/international-internship-resources) [4].

For information about funding your experience, see [Funding](https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/abroad/swt/work/funding) [5].

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