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Youth volunteerism highlighted at service summit

NEW PALTZ – Students and community leaders from the non-governmental, business and public sectors gathered at the non-profit Ulster Corps' annual Service Summit at SUNY New Paltz on Wednesday to address youth volunteerism in Ulster County. The program included presentations by college- and high-school age youth, service learning coordinators, and agency representatives.

The session explored how youth participate in volunteering, returns on volunteerism, organizing to harness the contributions of volunteers, and it highlighted examples of service, as well as challenges young volunteers face in seeking and obtaining opportunities.

Prior to the session, attended by upwards of 85 people, Ulster Corps conducted a poll on volunteer use and practices. Results showed 75 percent of the 30 non-profits surveyed as rating volunteers as very important to agency functioning, while nearly 60 percent had volunteer coordinators and just less than half provided orientations or trainings.

The survey also showed 25 percent of the organizations surveyed using high school students while greater than 37 percent use college age volunteers. The mix of all volunteers was evenly spread across unskilled, professional, clerical and other types of services.

Given potential for youth volunteers to gain skills at the same time that organizations benefit from no- or low-cost labor, Ulster Corps involved SUNY students in exploring how to match volunteers and service opportunities. The effort focused on web-based applications, including mapping to identify places where volunteers are sought and by aggregating information to help youth get to sites.

In discussing efforts to help students get out in the community beyond the SUNY New Paltz campus, sophomore Dylan Krakowski said the mapping tool comes in handy,

"It can help students see what opportunities are on bus routes and they feel more comfortable about where they are going and they know how to get there," Krakowski said.

According to the website Independent Sector, a national estimate of the value of volunteer time is \$23 per hour. According to a 2006 report sponsored by Dyson Foundation, greater than 80 percent of non-profits surveyed in the broader region used volunteers or interns contributing an undefined part of the aggregate economic impact of nonprofits in the Mid-Hudson Valley economy which at that point was about \$6.5 billion, or 14 percent of the total economic output of the region.

In discussing engaging a new generation of volunteers, panelist Megan Weiss-Rowe of Family of Woodstock noted that based on work with Kingston area youth at the Everett Hodge Center in Midtown, there often are opportunities to foster volunteer involvement right in the neighborhood people live in, but also noted that resources are needed to prepare for youth volunteerism, that volunteers are not really free, although there are benefits to both the volunteers and those they serve.

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