

Top 10 Questions to Ask Before You Volunteer

A good way to make sure you're prepared to take on a volunteer position is determining whether you've evaluated the logistics behind volunteer work. Not everyone will be able to volunteer, no matter how much they want to, and sometimes the reason why will be out of your control. You may not have the time that a volunteer gig requires, or you may not be able to afford an unpaid position while you're considering a paid job at the same time. We've come up with a list of questions you should ask yourself before starting your volunteer search. The questions below will also help you figure out the kind of volunteer work will fit your particular situation, because no one volunteer experience will fit all.

1. What are my interests?

Whether you're interested in a volunteer position that will fit with your intended field of study, or you want to focus your volunteer efforts on a particular population or cause, you'll need to consider what your interests are to narrow down your options. There are volunteer opportunities out there for almost any interest area you'll be able to think of, so take some time to figure out what is motivating you to volunteer in the first place.

2. What are my skills?

Certain volunteer positions will ask applicants to boast unique skill sets, so if you have skills that may be valuable to a particular organization, consider that when you're looking for volunteer work. You may be gifted musically, for example, but not using those talents in your intended major at your college. You could then be a great resource for a local music therapy program or summer camp for at-risk youth. Think about what makes you unique, as you would during a scholarship search, when looking for volunteer opportunities.

3. What do I most want to learn from the experience?

A volunteer job can be a good place to get your feet wet in your intended field of study or to learn new skills that could be useful to you once you graduate from college. Think about the kinds of things you want to learn from your time volunteering, because you may not only end up learning about yourself, but learning useful skills for the future, as well.

4. What will I gain from volunteer work?

Although we'd all like to assume people volunteer for selfless reasons, it's not a bad idea to think about what you'll gain from one particular volunteer position over another. There could be academic credit involved, or exposure to people in the field you'd like to end up in after graduation. Think about what you want to get from your volunteer experience, as everyone's end goals differ when it comes to unpaid service.

5. Will my volunteering affect my other commitments?

If you're already stretched thin and are worried about whether a volunteer position will make it hard for you to keep up with your schoolwork, a paid job, or other commitments you may already have going, you may need to reconsider the timing of your volunteer search. You can't do everything, so figure out what's most important to you early on in your freshman year – and stick to those commitments.

6. How flexible am I?

Once you've determined that you're able to take on a volunteer position, you may want to consider whether you're able to compromise on some things that seemed so important to you at the start of the volunteer search. Your ideals may have changed, so think about whether you're open to things like a location you hadn't considered, or a cause you had previously ignored. You may find being flexible teaches you something valuable in the end.

7. How much time do I have?

It's always better to wait until you know you have the time for some community service. That way, you won't risk leaving the person or organization you'd be working with in the lurch and in need of a last-minute replacement for you if you choose to leave your position mid-assignment. It's also important to consider how many hours per day, per week, or per month you have to dedicate to a volunteer job. Be realistic.

8. Do I want an ongoing assignment, a short-term assignment, or a one-time assignment?

Depending on the organization or individual you'll be volunteering with, you may have the option of choosing how long you'd like your volunteer work to last. Other assignments may not be so flexible, and require that volunteers stick with that assignment for a specific period of time. Make sure you know what's expected of you before applying to a volunteer position, as you may want to tailor your search to how much time you're willing to offer a cause.

9. Do I want to work alone, or with a group?

Many professional organizations or church groups organize team volunteer activities for those who need that social dynamic to get them more involved in community service. If you prefer a position with more independence, however, you may want to find a volunteer gig where you'll be responsible for yourself, whether that's setting your own schedule or molding the position to fit your interests.

10. Are there any associated expenses, and if so, will I be reimbursed?

Volunteer positions are by definition unpaid. There are some positions, however, that will require you to pay for some costs out-of-pocket (transportation expenses, for example). You may get reimbursed for some expenses associated with your volunteer job. Either way, keep tabs on what you spend, as you'll be eligible for tax breaks come tax season.

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