

# Exploring Volunteer Abroad Programs

## Start with Your Campus Resources

Your study abroad, career, or service-learning/volunteer office may have volunteer abroad programs specifically for students from your university. Exploring these are an important first step as these programs may be well aligned to your needs and fit in with your academic plan and schedule. Better yet, the hard part of reviewing and approving has already been done for you to narrow down the options. If you don't find the ideal fit in the preapproved options it may be time to look further. When doing this initial campus exploration it's also a good time to gather resources about options for credit, scholarships, or other support whether you're doing a program through your school or independently. Find out who can help you and how and be sure to reconnect throughout your process.

## Finding Your Own Volunteer Abroad Program

Volunteer abroad programs offer the opportunity to provide community service and engagement at a grassroots level, working on projects with local community members to meet critical needs, ideally defined by those local community members. Often these projects are focused on serving underprivileged, economically disadvantaged, or developing populations around the world and offer opportunities that range from unskilled to professional work. Through these types of projects, individuals can gain excellent career building skills and cultural immersion in local communities. The length of a placement opportunity can range from a few days to a semester or longer. Many programs exist to connect volunteers with projects in exchange for a fee.

## Things to Keep in Mind About Fee-based Programs

A *fee-based volunteer placement program* helps to match you to a volunteer opportunity in a variety of fields in the location of your choice. They charge a fee for the services they provide you in this process. There are many programs out there, so it can be overwhelming to review and select one. This document provides some things to keep in mind and to ask when comparing programs and making a selection that works best for you.

- **Applications:** Application requirements and processes will vary widely depending on the organization, type of volunteer service, location of the experience, and length of your volunteer placement. Please don't be put off by a lengthy application – it is actually a sign of quality that indicates their concern for a good match
- **Placement process:** Depending on the program and your field of interest, the placement may be part of the application process or you may not get final details until right before (or right after) you arrive.
- **Inclusions:** Every programs will vary in terms of what is included in the fee, such as housing assistance or placement, insurance, length of stay, visa assistance, local transportation and excursions, language classes, or other options. This is an important comparison point.
- **Visas:** In some countries, it is required that you obtain a specific type of visa in order to be in the country legally. While the volunteer placement program will often help you with this process, be prepared to pay for this in addition to your program fee if it is not included.

## Things to Consider When Exploring Fee-Based Volunteer Abroad Programs

There are many, many programs out there that can to help your volunteer abroad. You should ALWAYS do your own research to compare the programs available to you so that you feel confident that the program you select is worth the cost and services they are providing you and that their values and priorities are in line with yours. These questions will help you get started.

## **Organization's History and Track Record**

- When was the organization founded? How long have they run programs with a volunteer component?
- How many volunteers have they placed over the years?
- Is it exclusively a student program?
- Where do volunteers come from?
- How long have they operated in the country and city that you are considering?
- Where is the organization based?
- Do they have a social media presence? Photos of previous volunteers, blogs, etc.
- Can I talk to alumni/references?
- Is this a faith-based organization? If so, am I comfortable with that and able to work collaboratively regardless of whether their religious affiliation and values are in like with my own?

## **Understand the Placement Process**

- What is the placement process? Does it entail paperwork, an interview, etc.? How should you prepare for this process?
- Will I be applying to specific positions or a general area of service?
- Who coordinates the placement matching to local partners in the host community? Who will you work with on-site?
- Will I be the only volunteer at my site or are there usually multiple students at each site? If so, how many? How many students are usually in this country/city at the time I want to go?
- What language level, if any, is required? How does level affect my placement options?
- Are there physical fitness requirements?
- What are my options for duration of the placement?
- Is there a guarantee of placement (and in your desired field)? When should I expect to hear about my placement?

## **Assess the Organization's Support and Accountability**

- How are projects developed? Are projects created by local community members or by the placement organization? Are projects long-term and sustainable or one-time activities? Do they reflect needs identified and generated by the community?
- What meaningful projects will I be asked to complete? Do you have examples of past volunteer placements?
- How are my funds distributed? What percentage of my fees go toward logistics and what goes to the local organization?
- Is there a solid team behind the nice website?
- Do they have direct relationships with the supervisors in the volunteer organization?
- Will you have a dedicated point of contact when in-country who is available 24/7?
- What are their health and safety protocols? Who would I contact in the event of an emergency?

## **Clarifying Program Features, Cost & Logistics**

- When is an application fee or deposit due? Is this refundable? When is the total balance due? What is the cancellation policy?
- What is the total program cost for what I am seeking? What is included in that? What are my additional expected expenses beyond that cost (e.g. airfare, meals, local travel, etc.)?
- How does the total cost of participating on this program compare to the time and cost of finding and coordinating a volunteer experience independently?
- Can I use financial aid? What scholarships do they have available?

- Does the provider help with the visa process? What visa is required? Will they assist with the visa process or will I do this on my own? (*If you are not a U.S. citizen ask how your visa requirements may differ*)
- Is housing included? Where is it located, and what are the housing options? How do the options affect cost? Will I be living alone, with a family, or with other students? Are the students local or other students from abroad? How are homestays approved?
- What happens during the preparation stage? How do you get information and advice before you depart? How will I be prepared for adjusting to the local community and culture?
- What is included in the orientation when I arrive abroad? How will I be introduced to the local community and volunteer organization?
- What happens after the program? Is there an alumni network to tap into after your program?

## **Websites, Programs, & Resources for Volunteering Abroad**

Rather than using Google, your time will be much better spent with a targeted search engine. There several good search tools that offer listings for volunteer abroad programs. Use these to identify programs that you can vet using the questions above. These sites may include reviews or other information, but as with anything you will need to ask the questions that are important to you to vet as everyone's experiences are very different.

[GoAbroad.com](http://GoAbroad.com)

[GoOverseas.com](http://GoOverseas.com)

[International Volunteer Programs Association \(IVPA\)](http://International Volunteer Programs Association (IVPA)) - Listing of volunteer abroad programs with membership with IVPA, which requires adherence to professional standards of conduct for volunteer programs.

[Idealist.org](http://Idealist.org) – Listing of non-profit opportunities which may include programs as well as organizations directly seeking volunteers.

## **During & After Volunteering Abroad**

Remember the resources you identified early on and get support that's available to you. This may include advising, credit, scholarships or anything else.

Whether your volunteer experience was through your school or not be sure to circle back to these resources upon your return to take advantage of their support. Your study abroad, career or service office may offer workshops or advising to help you process and incorporate the experience into the next steps in your career exploration.