



# Retaining your volunteers in the first few weeks

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Retaining volunteers through the screening and induction process and their first few weeks of volunteering is a big challenge for all organisations that involve volunteers. Most of you are probably familiar with the frustration of having dedicated a lot of precious time and energy to new volunteers – the paperwork, interviews, reference checks, inductions, etc., – only to have them drop off within a few weeks of starting.

The first thing you need to remember is that this experience is quite normal – it's just one of the realities of working with volunteers. In my experience working on various volunteer-dependent programs, we generally anticipate a 50% to 75% drop-out of volunteers between their initial enquiry and their first few weeks of volunteering. Some don't make it past the enquiry stage, some drop out during the application and screening stage, and others drop out when they realise that either a) they've overcommitted, or b) it wasn't quite what they'd expected. Bear in mind that these people probably wouldn't have gone on to make committed and reliable volunteers anyway... so in reality they may be saving you future grief!

Although a certain level of drop-out is to be expected, there are nonetheless things you can do to maximise the chances of retaining volunteers in their first few weeks with the program. volunteers make to your program (this may also be a great opportunity to recruit new volunteers!)

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The Centre for Multicultural Youth is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

Centre for Multicultural Youth  
304 Drummond St, Carlton VIC 3054

T (03) 9340 3700 • F (03) 9349 3766  
info@cmy.net.au • cmy.net.au



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## The initial stages: recruitment, screening and induction

- Make volunteers feel welcome and valued from the moment they first come into contact with your organisation. It is important to respond to volunteer enquiries as soon as possible; try to make your initial contact friendly and welcoming.
- Make clear to potential volunteers how the screening and induction processes work and approximately how long they should expect to wait until they start volunteering. (Don't forget, a volunteer can commence as soon as you receive their Working With Children Check receipt).
- Be clear from the start about the role and what is expected of volunteers, for example weekly attendance, student reporting procedures, etc. Providing a volunteer tutor role description is a great way of making this information clear (for a sample Volunteer Tutor role description see <http://cmy.net.au/homework-club-resources>)
- The induction is a fundamental stage, and should include both documentation and verbal communication. To save time, ask volunteers to read all relevant documentation (orientation pack / handbook, codes of conduct, volunteer agreement, relevant policies, etc.) before their induction – then you can go over documents and emphasise important points in person. For sample induction presentations and checklists see [www.cmy.net.au/homework-club-resources](http://www.cmy.net.au/homework-club-resources)
- Encourage volunteers to enrol in the Learning Beyond the Bell tutor training – ideally tutors complete this within their first few weeks of volunteering. This will not only improve the quality of a volunteer's tuition, but give them more confidence in their role.

## The first few weeks

Remember that volunteers may be feeling nervous and unsure when they first start tutoring. No matter how clear you've made the role, the reality can be very different from a new volunteer's expectations!

- Make sure volunteers are greeted and they know what they're supposed to be doing from the moment they arrive at the program in the first few weeks. There's nothing worse than standing around feeling useless while everyone else is busy!
- Make sure there's always something for volunteers to do – if volunteers are giving up their time, they want to know that it's being put to good use.
- At the same time, you need to ensure the role is meeting their expectations – is the volunteer doing the tasks that they expressed interest in?
- It is important to support and 'be there' for volunteers during their first few weeks. Allow opportunity for volunteers to debrief after their first few sessions. They need to know that a) the challenges/difficulties they experience are normal, and b) they don't need to have all the answers!
- Making the time to talk to volunteers about how they are going is fundamental in the first few sessions... If you don't have time to do this yourself, think about using other volunteers – as they do at Collingwood Homework Club:

### ***Lessons from the sector: The 'buddy' system at Collingwood Homework Club***

To support volunteers in their first weeks at homework club, Collingwood Homework Club introduced a 'buddy' system. New volunteers are paired up with existing volunteers and they tutor together for the first few weeks. This not only helps new volunteers build their confidence in a comfortable setting, but also relieves pressure on those running the program.

Show volunteers that their time, effort and contribution are appreciated – there are many ways to say thanks and not all of them involve money or excessive amounts of time! Look at what the following volunteer mentioned as their most rewarding moment at their homework club:

***“I remember one of my students giving me a ‘thank you’ card at the end of the semester. It was the most rewarding moment, to be given the recognition of my effort in the simplest of forms...”***

- For more ideas for thanking volunteers see <http://cmy.net.au/homework-club-resources>
- Remember... many volunteers feel personally invested in your homework club, and are committed to ensuring the program’s development and success. As such it is so important to support your volunteers and treat them like colleagues rather than ‘your staff’.