

AFS-USA 2019 Hosting Conference

Dallas, TX

Plenary Remarks

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I'm very pleased to represent the Board of Directors this weekend - though I'd say, as a relatively new Board member, I'm more comfortable thinking of myself as a volunteer like most of you!

In the Missouri Gateway Area Team, my volunteer role - nearly every day - involves one or more of the following: calling and emailing schools, attending events, speaking with prospective host families, or interacting with volunteers or prospective volunteers as the Volunteer Coordinator. So, when I was asked to talk to you today about how we can broaden our reach in AFS-USA I naturally thought of the best practices I have learned with my colleagues in Missouri. We do work as a team and routinely SHARE with one another what we've found that works, what doesn't work, and what ideas we're wanting to try - including some crazy ones!

So --- team is a concept I come back to over and over when thinking of opportunities at the national level! I wonder how others are approaching their work as a TEAM and what ideas you've used to broaden your teams? After all, our strength

as an organization comes from collaborating with one another and sharing our ideas. AFS-USA is ONE BIG TEAM in that sense.

First, how can we broaden the reach of our teams as volunteers? Some years ago, the Missouri Gateway Team abandoned the notion of 1 to 2 people being responsible for host family finding or 1 to 2 people doing all of the support work or 1 to 2 people designing and implementing our orientations. We very intentionally moved in the direction of developing Hosting teams, Support teams, Orientation teams (and I mean groups of 10 to 30 volunteers with well-defined roles and trained for those roles and talking together throughout the year).

We worked to engage volunteers who were registered but not actively involved and we reached out to invite returnees and like-minded individuals to become volunteers. We broke down the tasks into smaller and smaller pieces - so that, for instance, one person now coordinates all host family interviews and she knows 30 trained volunteers who are willing to do those interviews. Another person coordinates transportation for all of our orientations. We invite host families to register as volunteers at the end of the hosting year; we concentrate on registering our recent returnees and quickly assimilating them into the TEAM. And every time we identify a returnee living/working in our community - we reach out to incorporate them into the AFS fold. We've found new volunteers in all of those ways!!

We're about to approach some critical months in our hosting season, so it's time to expand our hosting teams again - and train them for the specific tasks at hand. Perhaps you need more people to do host family interviews or you need suggestions of new host family prospects. Those are important tasks that don't require time every

day or week. It's not too early to reach out to current host families or last year's host families to ask if they are willing to register as volunteers and help the current hosting team - some will tell you they can't help until summer, but asking now plants the seed!

Expand your reach into new/different segments of your communities. It's so easy to talk only to our friends and close associates - I constantly remind myself I need to match my talk about inclusion and diversity with specific efforts to broaden our hosting community and our volunteer community. To that end, let's routinely get out into parts of the community that are not like most of us. For example, in addition to marketing AFS to your own faith community, ethnic community, or business community, how about going to an entirely different faith, ethnic, or business community?

And while we're thinking about broadening our reach - How can we broaden our team concept as it relates to building relationships with schools? I know many of you already approach elementary and middle schools as well as high schools and I encourage you to do more of that - we can impact those younger communities!!

Seed planting, I call it!! Bountiful harvests don't happen overnight - they take careful planning and nurturing to produce a yield!! Those AFS seed packets are an ingenious idea because the seed planting metaphor is so applicable to what we do. For example, some volunteers love being with our students and younger children (think retired elementary teachers!!!) and are delighted to take responsibility for one or two afternoon or evening festivals where our hosted students participate in World Culture Fairs of an elementary school or International Nights at a high school or community festivals - when we participate in those events we are spreading the

word about AFS and planting seeds! These events are fun and relatively non-stressful ways to engage beginning volunteers.

And also broaden your outreach to schools by building awareness of AFS at school related events in the community. Every one of us has social events in our teams and there are athletic and fine arts events at our high schools. Someone in your team is planning your social events and many people in your team are likely attending those high school events. Don't miss any opportunity to invite superintendents and principals and counselors to your AFS events and don't overlook the chance of touching base with those same school officials every TIME you attend a school event. If they already know you as the "face of AFS" - great - just make a casual comment about what a great year Jose is having and thank them!! But if they do not know of your connection, then introduce yourself and with no agenda, no "specific ask" - just make the connection, thank them for welcoming AFS students and tell them how much you love the school! (As a retired high school administrator, I remember what it feels like to be on the receiving end of supportive, happy comments!) If you have a welcoming picnic or event in August or a farewell event in June, be sure to invite the superintendent, principal and other key school personnel. Do it every year regardless of whether they attend. All of these small, subtle efforts of building awareness add up and will make a difference. Be sure school personnel know about opportunities for students to study abroad. Just two days ago, a district level coordinator at a very large district in suburban St. Louis commented to me that he always "intended to meet the students" but never managed to get around to it. Now I'll be sure our students meet him this year and next - he has become a key supporter of AFS who regularly refers families to us, sends prospective study abroad students to us, and

even recently asked me if AFS did F1 visas because a family in his district was looking into that. Now this chatty relationship did not occur overnight – in fact ten years ago, this school district routinely turned down AFS placements, but when personnel in the district office changed, we got on the fast track to nurture the relationship with this new person!! We did some seed planting ten years ago that started paying off a few years later and has continued to yield results.

Broaden your reach with schools by approaching schools where AFS has not established a relationship – explain what we have to offer and ask what AFS might do to help the school meet its own goals and objectives! Listen carefully and then try to connect the dots. Don't be timid about going to magnet schools, independent schools, public schools with a particular focus – let them know we can search for students who are a fit for their community. Go to the schools run by faith groups – Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and turn to interfaith partnership groups - as well as the synagogues, mosques and temples – In other words, don't stop just with marketing to groups which correlate to your Area Team membership!

Clearly – I could talk on and on about how we broaden our reach, and I know that others have an equal number of ideas. Let's all keep sharing our good ideas and, above all, let's keep celebrating our successes!