

Service Learning That Saves Lives: Blood Drives

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Abstract

Blood drives make a perfect health education service learning project for high school and college students, especially college students majoring in health education. It is a true win-win project. Students learn about the gift of life and have a chance to practice valuable organizational, communication, problem-solving, marketing and evaluation skills. The community benefits from additional blood stores and expansion of the community blood donor base.

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Introduction

I started incorporating blood drives into my curriculum for health education majors nine years ago. At that time, I thought it would be easy – a no-brainer; a walk in the park; a slam dunk. I was wrong. It is hard to convince people to donate blood. Once the donors are convinced to donate, it is hard to guarantee everyone a good experience. Then there is community/parental approval, administrative approval, staff support, scheduling, facilities and barriers specific to the site. But it is a perfect learning experience because everything that can go wrong in health education program planning and implementation, can go wrong with a blood drive. Every drive provides a case study of its own and as the semesters cumulate, the experiences create a wealth of learning. Along with the learning is the invaluable contribution of blood for those who are ill and injured. This article is a blood drive primer.

The Importance of Blood Drives

Consider the following facts posted by America's Blood Centers (ABC, 2005):

- 4.5 million American lives are saved each year by blood transfusions.
- Someone in America needs blood every two seconds.

- About one to five people entering a hospital needs blood.
- Three gallons of blood is used every minute in the United States.
- Fewer than five percent of healthy Americans eligible to donate blood actually donate each year.
- Just one pint of donated blood can help save the lives of one to three people.
- By the time they reach 72 years of age, 95 percent of all Americans will have used blood or one of the components that can be derived from blood.

There is no viable artificial substitute for blood. We can only get blood from willing blood donors. With each year our country's blood needs increase and the number of people willing and eligible to donate blood decreases. Initiating blood drives at the high school and college levels increases the possibility that students will embrace the identity of becoming life-long donors.

Preparing Students to Host a Blood Drive Don't Expect Instant Enthusiasm

When I first introduced the idea of a blood drive to my students they reacted with horror. One would have thought I'd asked them to give a kidney rather than a pint of blood. Now, after years of blood drives, most students are aware

that enrollment in my classes means being a part of a blood drive. Their reticence is gone. They have been asked to give blood by students ahead of them in the program and they have seen that our department has a culture that values blood donation. Any project that introduces students to a new and unknown experience, especially one involving blood letting, will create resistance. Once it becomes a known entity through the grapevine, it is easier to get student buy-in.

Spend Class Time Educating Students About the Steps of Blood Donation

It is important to go through each step of the blood donation process with the class before

they are asked to donate, and before they try to recruit other blood donors. If students have heard about blood donation it is usually a story of someone having a bad experience. No one talks about good blood donation experiences because there is nothing to say, but a bad experience is dramatic and attention-getting. Students need to know that while bad experiences happen, they are fairly rare and often are related to the blood donor not eating on the day of donation or drinking enough water, or being very scared about donating and suggestible to fainting.



Figure 1
Sample of one of our t-shirt designs and blood drive themes



Figure 2
Blood Drive Check-In Table

There are four steps in the blood donation process: 1) medical history; 2) quick physical; 3) donation; and 4) refreshments. Prior to beginning the process, donors are asked to show photo ID, sign-in, and read an information sheet. It is a good idea to ask four general screening questions at this time: 1) Have you eaten today?; 2) Have you been drinking plenty of water?; 3) Are you feeling well? Do you have any symptoms of illness?; 4) Have you had a tattoo or body piercing in the last year? The answers to these questions can reduce the amount of deferrals later in the process which saves time for the donor as well as the staff.

In the medical history, donors are asked a long list of personal and somewhat rude questions. These questions are asked of every donor, every time the donor goes through the process. They are important as a way of deferring donors who may put the blood supply at risk, or who may risk their own health by donating. It is best to tell students ahead of time that they will be asked about sexual practices, drug use, and personal health status. All answers to the questions are confidential.

In the quick physical, the donor will be weighed, have their temperature and blood pressure taken, and get a finger stick to determine their red blood cell level. Most students have had their finger stuck for a blood test and have found this

to be painful. They fear that blood donation will be ten times worse because more blood is being removed. Most regular donors agree that the finger stick is the worst part of the blood donation process, and this makes sense because there are far more nerve endings in the finger than in the middle of the arm.

The weight requirement is 110 pounds. The weight requirement is for the protection of the donor. Every individual has about two pints of blood for every 25 pounds of body weight. An individual weighing less than 110 doesn't have enough blood to give. Sometimes the desire to donate "like their friends" causes students to try and fool the scale. Every student should have an important part to play in a blood drive so that those who cannot donate do not feel left out.

The actual blood donation is usually the quickest part of the whole process. The steps so far can take 30 minutes or more, while the donation process usually takes about five to seven minutes. The donor's arm is cleaned, their blood pressure and pulse is monitored, and the needle is inserted. Most donors, even the veterans, look away while the needle is inserted. If the donor doesn't want to see any of the process, a towel can be spread over the site. After the pint has been filled, the donor gets a bandage and heads to the refreshment table.



Figure 3
Female student giving blood



Figure 4
Male student giving blood

The refreshment table is the place to replenish fluids and sugar and thank the donors for their contribution. Donors are required to stay at least 10 minutes. There should be a variety of foods available and student workers available to serve the donors. Recognition items can be given at this time. Some donors have a reaction after giving blood and the refreshment area is an opportunity to make sure every donor is feeling well enough to leave. For the healthy donor, the

donation process should not cause illness or weakness, or affect the rest of the day. Students working the refreshment area should be trained to handle a donor who feels faint or nauseous. While the donors wait their 10 minutes, they can be asked to give feedback about their experience through an oral interview or a written survey. This information can be valuable when the class is evaluating the blood drive.



Figure 5
Students enjoying the refreshment table with orange juice shots

Provide Training on Donor Recruitment

In order to convince others to donate, students need the facts about donation, safety, donor requirements, and responses to the most common excuses. Blood centers have a wealth of educational material and they are more than willing to supply a packet of materials for the students to read. Blood center recruitment specialists can visit your classroom or lead your students through a fieldtrip of the blood center. Fieldtrips are excellent as educational experiences because the students see donors in the process of giving blood, see the blood products being processed and stored, and listen to a variety of blood banking specialists emphasize the importance of donation. Students who are confident in their ability to answer the questions of others and believe in the importance of their work, make the best recruiters.

Recruiting Blood Donors

Donor recruitment is where students can practice their persuasion, communication and education skills. It is difficult to convince people to give blood, especially those who have never given. Effective recruitment requires using a variety of techniques such as group presentation, radio and newspaper announcement, tabling in common areas, flyers and most important, one-on-one conversation with potential donors. Students find it easier to do the passive methods, but all of these methods together are not as effective as face-to-face contact.

When recruiting face-to-face it is important to ASK EVERYONE, not just those the students know. Students often say they "asked everyone and no one will give!" In reality they may have asked a few close friends or made a general statement in a group of people. It is essential to ask directly, to invite others to give blood - students in their classes, club members, teachers, secretaries, maintenance staff, cafeteria workers, bosses, co-workers, friends, family members, people waiting in line, etc. In our surveying, the most common reason people gave for not having given blood was that no one asked them. Even in

a class of students who have just heard a blood drive talk, most feel that they, personally, haven't been asked to give blood. It is easy to believe that others are the target of the talk if an individual has never given blood and has not considered blood donation prior to the presentation. People want to hear, directly, "Would you like to give blood on Tuesday?"

The number of donors that need to be recruited depends on the goal of the drive. With the assistance of the blood center you can determine an appropriate pint goal. Once they are won over on the importance of donation, it is easy for students to get discouraged when others do not jump at the chance to donate. In a classroom of 35 college or high school students, it is common to get only three to five donors after a riveting presentation. Students need to see that as success. There is no 100% in health education and part of getting success is providing interventions for people at all the stages of readiness. People will say "no", but a "no" today often translates to a "yes" in the future after they hear the need for donors many times. It takes time for many people to get past their fears and rationalizations. Getting the message out is important work.

Promoting a Blood Drive

Promoting a blood drive means drawing attention. Group presentations and posters in strategic locations are a start, but the most effective techniques are face-to-face requests, gorilla marketing techniques, contests, and competitions. Gorilla marketing techniques are strategies that are attention getting and inexpensive. Some of our most effective gorilla marketing techniques are pictured below. We have had a student dressed as a giant blood drop posted outside the blood drive encouraging donors to come in. We have encouraged student bands to perform in front of our entrance and we have had contests such as pogo jumping and juggling. These attention-getting tactics cost us nothing, but drew a crowd. From there we could tell the crowd about blood donation and invite them to join us.



Figure 6
Pogo stick competition as a gorilla technique



Figure 7
Student dressed as a giant blood drop as a gorilla technique



Figure 8
Student band performing to draw a crowd

Another of our most effective techniques started as part of a social marketing campaign. My students created blood donation posters based on surveys completed by over 800 college students. To test the effectiveness of the posters, we held an "art show" of the posters and asked students passing by to rate them. To our amazement, over 200 students stopped to look and rate the posters, often spending considerable time

discussing the posters with friends. Unlike posters created by blood centers to appeal to the general population, our posters were designed by college students for college students. All of the posters can be viewed on our website (HCSV, 2005). The recruiting we did during the poster art show was more lucrative than all of the traditional methods put together.



Figure 9
Students rating the blood drive posters



Figure 10
Students rating the blood drive posters

Implementing a Blood Drive

A good blood donation experience is essential in getting a donor to give again. This is especially true for first time donors. On the day of the blood drive, students need to create an atmosphere that is warm, welcoming and positive. Donors should be greeted at the door

and treated as an important customer throughout their stay.

Thanking the Donors

Donors need to be thanked - many times and in multiple ways. They have taken time out of their life to give a pint of their own life source. Giving blood is personal, invasive and a little

uncomfortable. It is a truly unselfish gift. Adults who work in blood banking sometimes show less respect for the younger donor. Every donor deserves respect. Every donor's time is important. Every donor is giving a substance we cannot make. By making the donation process especially positive we increase the possibility that the donor will give again and may become a life-long donor.

Thank you should be said multiple times - when the donor signs up, when they are called the night before the drive, when they arrive at the drive, and after they donate. Thank you can also

be said through a display that communicates appreciation and includes the donor's name. Students can create a display that reflects the theme of the drive. Examples from our drives include: 1) a large blood bag with each donor's name tag added at the refreshment table; 2) paper hearts that the donors write statements on for a Valentine's Day drive; 3) a flag with the name tags as stars for a Veteran's Day drive; and 4) an umbrella with blood drop rain for an April showers spring theme. Donors can see how many pints have been given at that point in the drive, and the display can be posted after the drive to educate others about blood donation.



Figure 11
Valentine's Day donor recognition display



Figure 12
Veteran's Day donor recognition display



Figure 13
April Showers donor recognition display

Each semester we create a different t-shirt design and give our donors a free shirt. Fund-raising is required for us to do this, which provides another component to the service project. At times, our local blood bank provides recognition items such as pints of ice cream, personal pizzas, and t-shirts for every donor. These types of items are not always available so we make sure to create our own recognition package.

Evaluating a Blood Drive

Health education programs need to be evaluated and blood drives are no exception. For each blood drive, we create a survey and ask our donors to complete it while they relax at the refreshment table. Feedback from the surveys gives us good information about what the donors like and don't like. An example of one of our donor surveys can be seen in [Appendix A](#).

Over the years we have learned that high school and college blood donor want:

- A friendly nurse.
- To be called by name, not a number.

- To have the process explained.
- To go through the process as fast as possible.
- To be able to express their fears, and feel empathy and support from the staff.
- To be able to sign up with a friend and donate at the same time as a friend.
- To have lots of food at the refreshment table. Real food, not just cookies.
- To be able to eat as much of the free food as they want.
- To have fun at the refreshment table talking with friends and discussing their personal donation experiences.
- To have loud music or another diversion like a movie to watch.
- To not have to look at other donors while donating blood.
- To have a light, non-clinical atmosphere.
- To know that their blood will be used.
- To feel appreciated.
- To hear thank you.



Figure 14
Students analyzing donor evaluation forms

Conclusion

Blood drives give students an opportunity to provide the community with a valuable service while they practice many program planning and implementation skills. The same thing can be said for health educators. Blood drives can be elaborate or simple, integrated into a variety of disciplines, and implemented at schools of all sizes. To start a blood drive service project, call your local blood bank and ask for the blood donor recruitment specialist. Your call can be the beginning of a life saving partnership.

For more information:

American Association of Blood Banks

<http://www.aabb.org>

California Blood Bank Society

<http://www.cbbsweb.org>

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Appendix A
Example of a Student Written Donor Evaluation Form

BLOOD DONOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking a few minutes to give us some feedback!

Your Age: _____ Your Gender: _____ male _____ female

How many times (including today) have you given blood?

_____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3-5 _____ 6-10 _____ more than 10

How did you find out about the blood drive today?

_____ Class Presentation	_____ Friend
_____ E-mail announcement	_____ Family Member
_____ Blood Poster Art Show	_____ Asked by Recruiter
_____ Club or Organization	_____ Signs Outside the Blood Drive
_____ RA or Rec Center Staff	_____ Other

What are your reasons for giving blood today? Check all that apply.

_____ to help others	_____ to help a friend get extra credit
_____ my friends were donating	_____ it's an important thing to do
_____ for extra credit	_____ I was curious
_____ to save a life	_____ there is a blood shortage
_____ for the t-shirt	_____ other, please tell us what...

Would you be willing to donate blood in the future?

_____ definitely _____ probably _____ maybe _____ no

Do you have any ideas that would make the blood drive more enjoyable, comfortable and convenient? What are some food ideas? What are some gift ideas? What are some fun themes for the day? Share your creativity with us.

Do you belong to any groups or organizations that would be interested in sponsoring a blood drive? If yes what is the organization, and your name and phone number as a contact?

THANK YOU