

# How to Research an Organization

Go abroad with the best organization to meet your goals!

You've got a sense of the types of programs that are available, and now it's time to start researching and gathering information. Making the effort to find the perfect opportunity greatly increases your chance of having a spectacular experience abroad. Below we describe online and in-person sources that can help guide you to your ideal placement and funding opportunities. Keep an open mind and don't restrict yourself to a specific country! Focus instead on a region, and then choose a project focus. (RELATED RESOURCE LIST: See *MyWorldAbroad's* [International Volunteer Opportunities](#).)

## Beyond the bounds of the Internet

Your university or college can be a source of information about volunteer organizations, and staff may even be able to facilitate networking opportunities or link you to internal funding sources. It may take some legwork, but it will likely be worth the effort:

- **Career centers and study abroad offices:** These offices often work directly with volunteer and funding organizations, and their staff may be able to provide you with valuable connections.
- **Students and faculty:** If there are student organizations that work on an issue that interests you, or faculty who study the region you hope to work in, they will likely be able to suggest organizations.
- **Grant-giving offices or departments:** Grant funds or scholarships for students engaged in international volunteer work may also be available at your educational institution. Depending on the university, these may be administered by the study abroad office, academic departments, or even student groups. Ask multiple people, or seek the guidance of an advisor. Sometimes funding opportunities aren't well known on campus.

## Search Online

Beyond the so-called ivory tower, there are many resources that can direct you to funding opportunities and ideal volunteer organizations. And don't forget to start your search well in advance of your intended start date:

- **Large volunteer job boards and directories:** Visit NGO directories or large volunteer job board Web sites, such as [Idealist.org](#), to find organizations that offer opportunities in the country/region and sector you are interested in. Select a few organizations or programs that seem most relevant and conduct further research. (RELATED RESOURCE LISTS: See [Volunteer And Cultural Exchange Job Boards And Advice](#) or browse directly in our [All NGOs list by region and/or sector](#).)
- **Personal connections:** Don't hesitate to take advantage of your personal connections to find organizations and opportunities for funding. If you're involved in a faith community, ask administrators if they have any suggestions. If you have a family member working at a large corporation with a corporate responsibility program, they may partner with international volunteer organizations and may provide funding for service projects.
- **Online reviews and blogs:** It's always good to know what past participants think of the programs they have been in. Look for Web sites that offer reviews of various international programs, such as [Go Overseas](#), [GoAbroad.com](#) or [Abroad Reviews](#). Blogs are also a great way to get first-hand information about programs and participants' experiences. Read through personal experiences and comments – but with a critical and objective mind – to find the organization and program that's best suited for you.
- **Facebook and Twitter accounts:** If you are interested in a program offered by a specific organization, "like" the organization's Facebook page or follow them through Twitter. This is an excellent way to receive up-to-date information and volunteer placement offers that might not otherwise be accessible (even on the organization's Web site). Be sure to "like" the national or regional branch of the organization – not necessarily the international or global page. Even better, look for the specific program page, if the organization has created one.
- **International networking:** Consider joining social networking sites for internationally- or service-minded professionals. Specific traveler, expat, volunteer and intern networking sites are a great option as

well (see [Expatriate Networking Sites](#) for examples). Your school might also have a network to connect with alumni in the area, or those working in the field that interests you.

- **Closed groups and forums:** It's common for program participants or organizations to create their own closed Facebook groups or online forums dedicated to staying connected with alumni. These forums generally require usernames and passwords, but it's sometimes possible to gain access just by asking permission.

## Questions to Ask When Researching

Below you'll find a brief list of questions to consider as you are researching potential programs. This list is not exhaustive, but it should help you get into the right mindset when considering your options.

- **How long do you want to volunteer for?** In general, NGOs, religious organizations, and government agencies tend to send volunteers for longer work terms abroad. If you're looking for a term of six weeks or less, your best bet may be a placement agency.
- **What funds are available to you?** Placement agencies and volunteer vacations often cost much more than going abroad with a non-profit NGO. In most cases, higher costs reflect that more support services and comforts will be available. Personal travel and making direct contact with a local NGO abroad is the cheapest way to volunteer abroad. This approach has its risks, but also its rewards. Assess your risk tolerance (or taste for adventure) before making a decision.
- **Does the organization provide pre-departure orientation?** Some organizations offer in-depth training sessions either in your home country or upon arrival in the host country. Sometimes these training sessions relate to the work itself, while other times they focus on preparing you for the cultural experience. Some organizations even offer language training. Ask your organization about training.
- **Can you connect with past volunteers?** Once you've honed your list of potential agencies and organizations, consider contacting administrative staff to ask for contact information of past participants. Alternatively, check the organization's Facebook page to see what past volunteers are saying about this organization.
- **Does the volunteer project fit your goals and ethics?** What is the organization's mission statement? Is the local community involved in the decision to have international volunteers on the project? How involved are the local people in this project? Are the projects goals sustainable and worthy? All of these are difficult but important questions for a potential volunteer to ask. Develop your awareness of the numerous issues that always underlie any development project.
- **Will you be learning the local language?** Some organizations require a certain degree of fluency in the local language, while others conduct their programs largely in English. Ask about language usage, and if learning the language is important to you, ask if there's any opportunity for immersion or homestay experiences.
- **Is the program in an urban or a rural environment?** Remember that there can be a wide variety of volunteer program locations within a single country or region. Does it matter to you if you're in a city or a jungle? A mud hut or a hostel? Consider details before applying.
- **Is it a trusted program?** While there are a few examples of scams at work, other companies might just have poor reputations. To avoid getting caught up, pay attention to detail. Does the program offer clear information? Are they transparent about fees? Always research beyond each organization's Web site. Check comments in its Facebook groups, contact past participants, and look at the review sites mentioned earlier. A few negative reviews can be normal, but if you see a pattern, be wary.

Are you looking for a program that's open to participants of any skill level? Are there certain skills you're hoping to build or put to use? Consider these questions, and all the notes above, when researching organizations. And keep in mind that no matter what job you sign up for, you'll need to be flexible! Program requirements can change in a heartbeat, and you can find yourself working on unexpected projects. Stay open-minded and positive about the opportunity. Good luck!

## WANT MORE INFO ON GOING ABROAD?

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