

So, you've got a sense of the types of programs that are available to you, now it's time to start researching and gathering information. Taking the time to find the perfect opportunity can greatly increase your chances of having a spectacular volunteering experience abroad.

The Internet is a powerful tool for connecting volunteers and organizations. There are a few types of Web site that can be helpful to you in your search for international volunteer opportunities: volunteer placement sites, all-encompassing placement sites (that may also offer internships, teaching placements, study abroad placements and/or working vacations), official NGO Web sites and volunteer job boards. If you're not sure what type of volunteer experience you want, you may want to do a broad search over all four site types before you begin honing your search with specific parameters. Or, if you have a sense of what you'd like to do, you can limit your research time by selecting one type to focus on from the get-go. (RELATED RESOURCE LIST: See MyWorldAbroad's [International Volunteer 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, especially if you're looking to build specific career skills.

Search beyond the bounds of the Internet

There are also avenues beyond the bounds of the Internet that you may wish to tap into: 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 on your part to identify and contact the various offices at your particular institution, 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 names of organizations or individuals who could help you.
- **Students and faculty:** If there are student organizations that work on an issue that interests you, or faculty who study the region that you hope to work in, they will likely have suggestions for organizations you might be interested in.
- **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. Make sure you ask multiple sources for information about funding, or seek the guidance of an advisor—sometimes these funding opportunities are not well known on campus. (RELATED RESOURCE LIST: See [Awards And Grants Resources](#).)

Search the Internet

Beyond the so-called ivory tower, there are many other resources that can direct you to funding opportunities and the right volunteer organizations for you:

- **Large volunteer job boards and directories:** Since finding a good volunteer-sending organization can prove to be an overwhelming task, one of the first things you might want to do is compare organizations and programs. Visit NGO directories or large volunteer job board Web sites such as [Idealist.org](#) to find organizations that can provide you with 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 RESOURCES 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 as well. If you are involved in a faith community, ask administrators or those in leadership positions 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 in some cases, may provide funding for service projects. Do you have a personal connection to a service-oriented business or community group?
- **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](#) or [Abroad Reviews](#). Blogs are also a great way to get first-hand information about programs and participants' experiences. These blogs can either be personal blogs from participants or an organization's blog where all participants can post their stories. Read through these personal experiences and comments – but with a critical and objective mind – to find the organization and program that's best suited for you. (RELATED RESOURCE LIST: See [Top International Blogs](#).)
- **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:** Thanks to the rise of social networking, if you don't have any personal connections at home, you can make them elsewhere! Consider joining social networking sites for internationally- or service-minded professionals and groups that connect you with others who are interested in the same issues. Specific traveler, expat, volunteer and intern networking sites are a great option as well (see [Expatriate Networking Sites for a few examples](#)). Your college or university may also have a network that you can join to connect with alumni in the region, or working with the populations or issues that interest you.
- **Closed groups and forums:** It is common for program participants or organizations to create their own closed Facebook groups or online forums dedicated to staying connected with people from a specific cohort (e.g. United Nations Volunteers Mission 2014/2015). Online forums generally require a username and password, which are provided by the organization once you are officially part of the program. It is sometimes still possible to gain access to closed Facebook groups by asking the permission of page administrators: send a personal message first and explain why you want to be a part of the group. Also, see if the organization's program has a related open Facebook group where you can get in touch with past or current program participants.

As a general rule during your online research for volunteer-sending organizations and volunteer programs, always assess the organization's Web site. Don't focus on the design or technical details, but rather on the content: Are they a non-profit (this is to your advantage, since program fees – if any – will be tax-deductible) or a private company? Do they provide clear information about their volunteer programs? Are they transparent about program fees and about their own income as an organization? Do they provide clear contact and application information?

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Start Your Search Early!

Begin your search for volunteer placements well in advance of your intended departure date. Application dates vary widely, and it is important to leave yourself enough time for applying and preparing for departure. With some organizations, you can expect to wait 18 months before departure, and most require that you apply at least six to eight months in advance. That said, if you are taking the self-styled approach, you may be able to contact an organization abroad and hop on a plane to your host country in just a few weeks – or even a few days!

Questions to Ask When Researching

Below you will 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 therefore be a placement agency.
- **What funds are available to you?** Placement agencies and volunteer vacations generally cost significantly more than going abroad with a non-profit NGO. In most cases, higher costs reflect the number of services available to you as a volunteer in terms of support systems and the comforts of home. Personal travel and making direct contact with a local NGO abroad is the cheapest way to volunteer overseas. While this approach has its risks, it also has its rewards. Assess your level of risk tolerance (or taste for adventure) before deciding what type of volunteer experience you're really looking for.
- **Does the organization provide pre-departure orientation?** Some organizations offer in-depth training sessions either in your home country or upon your arrival in the host country. Sometimes these training sessions are related to the work itself, while other times they are intended to prepare you for cultural differences and safety procedures. Some organizations even offer language training. If this is important to you (and we think it should be), ask your potential organizations what they offer in terms of pre-departure orientations.
- **Can you connect with past volunteers?** Once you have 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. Connecting with people who have been through a specific program or volunteer term will be invaluable in helping you make your final decision.
- **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. While you may not be in a position to assess the answers you receive when asking these questions, you should at least consider these points as you 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. Check what level of language comprehension you'll have to have before going abroad, 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?** Sometimes it's easy to get distracted by the fact that you're planning a trip to a far-off place. Remember that there can be a wide variety of volunteer program locations within a single country or region. Does it make a difference to you if you're in a city or a jungle? A mud hut or a hostel? Be sure to consider the details of your program location before applying.

Are any special skills required? Is there a job description? Are you looking for a program that is open to participants of any skill level? Are there certain skills you're hoping to build on the trip? Or do you have a specific set of skills that you want to put to use? Does the organization provide a job description? Consider these questions, and any program requirements, when you are researching organizations. NGOs and long-term volunteer-sending organizations tend to have more skill and qualification requirements, and they also usually offer more detailed job descriptions. But keep in mind that no matter what job you sign up for, you'll need to be flexible when on the ground. Program requirements can change in a heartbeat, and your organization might need you to carry out tasks you weren't expecting.

A Last Word

The specific skills involved in your work overseas are certainly important to consider, but for most volunteers it's the cross-cultural living experience that's the most important learning component of their time abroad.

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