

Study on Student and NPO Administrator Experience in Volunteer Work

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify the attributes of student volunteers as well as to differentiate successful volunteer efforts from unsuccessful ones with the goal of increasing volunteer participation and satisfaction for both students and the organizations that use their help. Unique to other studies about community service learning, this work is an in-depth look into the student's role in the world of service-learning and volunteering. We also address the role of the non-profit administrator in the student's volunteer activities. Although this study is exploratory, through our research we anticipate to learn more about what student volunteers and non-profit administrations can contribute to enhance volunteer experiences.

1. Behaviors performed must be voluntary or based on the actor's free will, without bonds of obligation.
2. The act of volunteering or seeking ways of providing services for other involves some amount of deliberation.
3. Volunteer services must be over an extended period of time.
4. The decision to volunteer is based entirely in the person's own goals and without expectation of material compensation.
5. Volunteering involves serving those who desire help.

Introduction

Volunteering is a major source of social good in the United States. According to one estimate, in 1995, 93 million adults in the United States participated in some form of volunteerism. That number contained 49% of the adult population in the United States at the time. Twenty-five percent of these individuals surveyed contributed five or more hours per week to volunteering.¹ In 2001, the estimated volunteer contribution in the United States was \$239.2 billion. This estimate assumes that a total savings of \$16.05 per hour is achieved from each volunteer.¹ This value is more than 50% of what the United States Department of Health and Human Services allocated for their expenditures (\$435.45 billion dollars).

The aim of this study is to identify the attributes of student volunteers as well as to differentiate successful volunteer efforts from unsuccessful ones with the goal of increasing volunteer participation and satisfaction for both students and the organizations that use their help. In this study, non-profit administrators in the community were surveyed about their experience with volunteers and students at the University of Michigan about their personal volunteer experiences. Goals of the study are twofold: to help administrators of non-profit organizations better utilize student volunteers, and to help students seek and find more meaningful volunteer opportunities. In order to accomplish this, one needs to understand the functions, motivations, and goals of student volunteers. Why are some volunteer experiences satisfying to both the volunteer and the organization? Why is it that some are not? How can satisfaction be maximized for agencies and volunteers? Snyder identifies the following criteria for volunteerism¹:

Since many students either receive credit for volunteering or, volunteer as a requirement, some may not consider them to be volunteers. This may be why although their contribution to volunteerism is significant, there is little current research independently considering them as a population.

Do the 'rewards' they receive invalidate their candidacy for volunteer status? Does a helpful attitude get disregarded if not entirely altruistic? One should recognize that most people have selfish reasons for volunteering, if only to make friends. If this does not invalidate considering one as a volunteer, why should receiving credits? While students defy the traditional definition of volunteering, as will be discussed later in this paper, they still contribute significantly to non-profit organizations (NPOs) and social services. In addition, while students may receive grades or peer pressure as incentives to volunteer, they are still doing good for society and offering their time and energy to help others, regardless of other purposes it may serve for them.

One might claim that everything about volunteering logically shouldn't happen. Selfless investments in strangers do not make sense. So, why do they happen? This study desires to know more about what people get out of it and why they do it. What would inspire such unusual behavior? What about it makes one feel good? And, lastly, is it important to understand this in order to determine what the best experiences will be for students and NPOs?

Previous studies suggest that there are several reasons for which people volunteer: for a greater understanding of the world, for social benefits, for career advantages, to protect oneself from guilt associated with being more privileged, and for enhancement of good feelings derived from helping.² It is the case that people seem to volunteer for many different reasons

that are in no way limiting to their capabilities to serve their selected organization. More specifically, studies show that when considering the different psychological traits or motivations that individuals may have regarding their volunteer experiences, one can conclude that even diametrically opposed motivations can often lead to the same actions and the same net result.³ Either way, the end goals are achieved and seem to encompass aiming towards the betterment of society and student enrichment.

The fact that there is such variation in why different people volunteer allows organizations the opportunity to recruit different kinds of volunteers.¹ Students who are either self-orientated (volunteering for potential personal benefit such as career skills) or other-oriented (concerned more with those they will be serving) will respond to different types of recruitment. For example, a more self-serving individual may respond to an ad that reads, "build your resume; come and volunteer at our organization." While someone who is more "other-oriented" might respond to another-oriented advertisement which says, "come help others." This same study concludes that the initial motivations are not a good predictor of how reliable students will be or how long they will continue their volunteer service.

If we try to compare the sustainability of individuals with different reasons for volunteering, we must consider the self-serving aspects of each of the defined volunteering motives. We must also consider a study (mentioned earlier) which states that self or other orientation is not an accurate indicator of performance and perseverance.³ Also, although some students are certainly more altruistic than others, there are always several motives involved when doing anything. How does one decide where the self-oriented individuals stop and the other-oriented volunteers begin on the spectrum of altruism? Does it even matter? In fact, it does. It turns out that those who openly recognize themselves as self-oriented may be more reliable volunteers.¹ Does this suggest that those who are working for themselves are more invested in the volunteer work? Since each person is receiving some sort of personal benefit for volunteering, rather than concluding that there is no correlation between those who are considered self or other oriented, one might conclude that people recognize whether they are motivated by benefits to themselves or to others.

Volunteers who have greater satisfaction in their work and also believe in its importance will stick to it even in hard times.⁴ This information suggests that NPOs should remind their volunteers of the importance of their work while simultaneously making sure that their volunteers are aware of the benefits others receive from their efforts. This will hopefully lead to increased student satisfaction and keep volunteers working harder and longer to serve the organization and its goals. But, after the volunteer (in this case student) is recruited, what makes for a satisfying experience? How does one encourage volunteers to have a greater stake in the cause? How can volunteers and NPO administrators do their part to ensure positive volunteer experiences? For example, advertisements that cater to a larger number of the specific volunteers' motivations will recruit more volunteers.¹ However, as mentioned earlier, it is also the case that there are fundamentally different characteristics of a volunteer experience which can sustain an individual.

Therefore, we can conclude that it is essential that a volunteer needs be satisfied in order to have the best experience which, in turn, enhances dedication and inspires longer commitment. This suggests that volunteers should do their part to educate themselves and NPO administrators should do their best to inform students of the opportunities available to them at their organizations before taking them on. Choosing a good NPO fit seems to be highly important and a strong indicator of quality and quantity of involvement.

While academic studies relating to community service have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, attention is focused on the phenomenon of the act of volunteering and rarely considers the administrator-volunteer relationship. In order to probe the volunteer to organization relationship further, attention must ultimately be paid to the often neglected interpersonal aspects of the NPO-volunteer relationship. In order to have a clear idea about this relationship, one must question the benefits to the NPOs, how can they be defined and quantified, and whether they justify using volunteers, specifically student volunteers? "Is free labor worth the insecurity and instability of using volunteers?" This is an overriding question that will be explored in this study.

Since this work is exploratory there are no specific hypotheses. One can, however, anticipate learning more about what student volunteers and the NPO administrations can contribute to enhance volunteer experiences. This study strives to improve the quality of student volunteer experiences at local NPOs which has the potential to improve local NPO functioning while providing more fulfilling educational and volunteer experiences for students.

Methods

Since the goals of this study are to understand both the student volunteer experience and the NPO administrator experience, both students and NPO administrators were surveyed. Three different groups of students were surveyed. Each student group was chosen either in efforts to select people who have an interest in volunteering or to represent the general student population at the University of Michigan.

The first group of students included students in pre-medicine studies. They were emailed from a list obtained from The Career Center at the University of Michigan. Another group of student participants came from those registered at the Ginsberg Center in a program called America Reads. The Ginsberg Center is a university unit at the University of Michigan that works with students and faculty members in efforts to combine community service and academic and civic learning. At the Ginsberg Center questionnaires were administered in person. Another group were University of Michigan students (n=100) who were randomly approached at the computer lab in Angell Hall.

The pre-medicine groups emailed consisted of University of Michigan graduates and students preparing to attend medical school. There were 580 who received the survey, 16 of whom returned it. At the Ginsberg center, a total of 10 students were administered the survey in person, all of whom submitted their surveys. After distributing 100 surveys to students at Angell

Hall an additional 91 students completed and returned the surveys (91%).

There were a total of 72 NPOs in the Ann Arbor area who were sent the survey which inquired about their experiences with student volunteers. Seven surveys were returned to sender because of faulty address information posted online. Of the 65 survey that reached their recipients, a total of 37, just over half, were returned.

The significance of the NPO administrators being surveyed is as follows. Since this study aims to learn about how to improve the quality of the volunteer experience from the perspective of both students and NPO, it was essential to learn from the administrators how they experience student volunteers. Do they enjoy having them around? Are they helpful? If not, why? This study attempts to figure out why some organizations use student volunteers and others don't. It also seeks to discover what the positive and negative aspects are for those who do use volunteers. The list of NPO administrators selected to be recruited for the survey was obtained from an Internet search of NPOs. The main sources of NPO addresses came from volunteermatch.org and other Google listings of individual organizations that came up under the search, "Non-profit organizations AND Ann Arbor Michigan." A survey was mailed to each of them with a consent form and cover letter at their offices.

The survey distributed to the students inquired about both their parents and their own claimed importance of volunteering. The survey also asked questions about the students' volunteer experiences, motivations to volunteer (if they did volunteer), and also requested some demographic information.

The survey sent to the NPO administrators included questions about their experiences with student volunteers. It inquired about their perceived advantages and disadvantages about working with student volunteers. The survey also requested specific examples of positive and negative experiences with student volunteers as well as information about the types of tasks assigned to student volunteer at their organizations.

Results

The NPO administrators were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their experiences with their student volunteers. NPOs surveyed use students for an incredibly wide range of tasks including: cooking, filing, running errands, event coordination, crisis intervention, computer help, making copies, and cleaning.

The most common advantages mentioned with regard to working with student volunteers were the energy and idealism of the students, the flexibility of the students' schedules during the day time, and the large number of them available. Much fewer commented on the benefits of the free labor, advantages of utilizing their expertise, and value of having the opportunity to educate students about the NPO community for the future.

Common disadvantages mentioned by the NPO administrators were scheduling conflicts, interruptions during the holidays or semester breaks, quick turnaround times, and low reliability. These disadvantages oftentimes seemed to leave the NPO administrators with a feeling of discouragement when considering training student volunteers. One NPO administra-

tor remarked, "The expectations of the students are too high for their commitment level."

Interestingly, an equal number of NPOs reported thinking that students were in it for resume building or job skills compared to having meaningful interactions with others or to give to others. While, as mentioned before, most to all NPOs reported being amazingly satisfied with their student volunteers, many also remarked that students too often expected to have fun when volunteering and expected more flexibility from the NPOs than they could offer. The NPOs reported were most interested in the students who consistently showed up and were on time. They also frequently expressed an interest in commitment from students. Although many NPO administrators recognized this attribute as a benefit in working with the student population, many NPO administrators claim that they want students to offer their input and expertise more often.

Some NPOs (19%) even reported wanting more volunteers. It was found that the need or want for more volunteers sometimes had an inverse relationship to the amount volunteer recruitment performed. For example, one administrator who said that their organization had too few student volunteers only mentioned two forms of recruitment exercised by their organization. In contrast, NPOs responding that they have just the right amount of volunteers frequently mention between 3 and 5 methods of recruitment. A common recruitment tool listed was the internet. Also, it was found that NPOs had better recruitment experiences when they directly coordinated with a professor or entity at the University.

When asked what their NPO has to offer student volunteers, NPO administrators offered a wide range of opinions: a new experience, selfless experience of community service work, and the opportunity to make a difference. Others mentioned good supervision, training programs, credits, or food. The few NPOs that claimed that they offer training and an organized program to participate in also seemed to report fewer disadvantages of working with the student population.

Amongst those surveyed, results show that there is a significant correlation between the frequency and claimed importance of students volunteering practices ($P=.000$). There also was a significant correlation between the claimed importance of volunteering to the students and their perceived importance of volunteering to their parents ($P=.000$).

Of those surveyed, female students returned more completed surveys than their male counterparts—representing 66% of those surveyed. In addition, when comparing the level of reported importance of volunteering between men and women students, our data did not show a statistical significance between their claimed importance regarding volunteering and their genders ($P=.001$). Out of all of those surveyed ($n=117$), all but 5 students had some volunteer experience. Just over eighty percent of students reported that they preferred more structured activities over those which are less structured (selecting 6 or less on a scale of 1-10, 1 being the most structured

While it is interesting to note that almost a third of the student participants (32.5%) are either agnostic or have no religion, this study did not find that there is a significant correlation between religion and volunteer practices amongst students.

Table 1: Frequency of Females Volunteering

Weekly/Monthly	Less than Monthly	Never
45%	55%	1%

Table 2: Frequency of Males Volunteering

Weekly/Monthly	Less than Monthly	Never
45%	45%	10%

Table 3: Student's Preferred Level of Structure for Activities that they Participate in

1-3 (more structured)	4-6 (neutral)	7-10 (less structured)
31.6%	48.7%	16.2%

Discussion

While many students claim to prefer structured activities, many NPO administrators do not have the time to offer this to volunteers. It seems crucial that the NPO administrators and students find a common ground in which students receive the structure they need and are provided with a forum where they can best utilize their expertise for the organization. If NPO administrators find a semi-structured system in which they establish some structure and set goals for students, students may respond with more consistency. This task will not be easy and entails more planning and premeditation on both the NPO administrators' and the students' part.

It seems that the least structured events are those which only instructions may be, "just walk around, observe, and find something to do," and an extremely structured event may be a list of routine tasks such as; cleaning or filing. As an alternative, a more moderately structured task would require an initial time investment of coming up with projects and learning about the students specialties, but, it seems there would be a great pay off in the end. For example, a highly structured task may be something as straight forward as putting together a mailing, cleaning, or filing. On the other hand, the least structured tasks are those which one has to come up with on their own, "just walk around and find something to do."

In order to maximize the benefits of working with student volunteers, we conclude that the NPO must make an initial investment in the volunteer. Learning about the volunteer's expertise or major is essential. If they are studying graphic design, maybe they want to work on the newsletter. A student majoring in psychology and marketing may want to help recruit new volunteers. Having an education major cleaning the bathrooms instead of helping with a curriculum, tutoring, or teaching would be a terrible loss to both parties involved. By taking time to learn about the volunteer and also teaching the volunteer about the organization, the pay off will be great.

After reading all of the disadvantages of working with student volunteers mentioned by the NPO administrators we had to ask, is the NPO student volunteer relationship one that is worth establishing? One must consider that free labor valued at \$16.05 per hour is difficult for an NPO to turn down.¹ Student energy and enthusiasm seems to be refreshing and relieving to NPO administrators, NPO staff, and even their clients.

The utilization of student expertise must be worth even more to the organization. The drawbacks, however, while difficult to quantify, cannot go unmentioned. Snyder concludes that volunteering is clearly beneficial, and volunteer organizations say that volunteers are helpful.¹ Nonetheless, there are costs associated with free labor. Many NPO administrators complained of cases where students displayed a sense of entitlement, lack of skills, feelings that they didn't take their work as volunteers seriously, etc.

One NPO administrator in this study complained that an irresponsible student once left a group of elderly people that he was supposed to be watching in a retirement community early and without notice. She was alarmed that this student was so irresponsible to risk leaving these people unattended and at risk of danger. In this instance, it is hard to speculate why the student was irresponsible but she appears not to have had the most selfless intentions. While it is fine to volunteer for reasons other than those which are exclusively self motivated and selfless, it is critical that a volunteer's actions do not precipitate harm. This, in addition to concerns of reliability of students, is a good example of why it is difficult to quantify the disadvantages of using student volunteers. While students are often very helpful, how often will there be inappropriate behavior with a student volunteer as compared to a non-student volunteer or an employee? This requires further research.

While oftentimes offering opportunity to the student, utilizing student volunteers may or may not be a cost effective practice for the organization. While it is not completely clear from the beginning whether or not a volunteer experience will be productive, there are certain precautions one can take to ensure the best chances of a productive experience. A recent study done in the school system parallels the example of the NPO to student relationship.⁵ In this study, Greenberg found that the more coordination, social, emotional, and academic efforts contributed to a school based program, the more those involved benefited. They found that short term efforts consistently yielded short term results and vice-versa. In this case, putting more in seems to entail NPOs investing more to not only attract more student volunteers, but also working to make sure that the students are the right fit for their organization. This process involves constant maintenance of the NPO relationship with the students. Students need to be reminded of the good they are doing so they will stay engaged and utilize their expertise.

There is a common contradiction throughout many of these surveys. The NPO administrators simultaneously claim students are helpful to them but then mention all sorts of disadvantages that one would think would be incredibly disruptive to the work. Why then is using student volunteers so satisfying for so many organizations? Unlike Snyder's claims that financial savings are a major reason for NPOs to utilize volunteers, this study showed that only 2 of 33 of NPO administrators claimed that saving money was an advantage in working with student volunteers. We suppose it is possible that they accepted it as a given or forgot to mention it. For our purposes, whether or not there is a significant monetary value to utilizing student volunteers is impossible to determine from this survey's data. It is clear that the NPO administrators equate students with energy and idealism, traits that seem to be quite valuable to the

NPOs.

It may be that case that the number of students recruited for this study was too small of a sample. Although it was important in some ways to find students who were involved in volunteering or interested in community service work, it may be the case that their practices and input do not represent students as a whole.

Whether this is a primary motivation or not, the pre-medicine students are all going into a field that focuses on helping people. The fact that there was such a small return on the emails that went out to this group may be exemplary of the lack of interest. It may also be exemplary of the large workload in their disciplines or of how unsuccessful email research can be. But, our sample from this group of students is so small that any conclusions other than speculations about the low survey return rate cannot be made.

Although feedback from people who had at least somewhat of an interest in the research were desirable, the America Reads students provided feedback that is exclusively from students who are actively volunteering and participating in the field. This is good because it provides more information about the student's experience in volunteering but, offers less of an opportunity to understand anything about all students and their experience (often required or requested by graduate programs) with volunteering.

The random group of students approached at Angell Hall may not have a deep interest in volunteering but, although many did express involvement in their surveys, presented a truer representation of the typical student on campus.

More research will be needed on cost and turnover at NPOs to assess whether the monetary and other values NPOs receive from volunteers is actually worth it considering the associated disadvantages. Such research should also address the potential for future volunteerism from students who have volunteered at some time during their education and other impacts of increased awareness of the NPOs cause. Could student involvement lead to more donations and other community involvement for the NPO that may be directly or indirectly related to the student's involvement but nonetheless advantageous to the organization?

Aside from the potential benefits awarded to the NPOs in this relationship, other research confirms that students gain many benefits from participating in a volunteer experience.¹ Studies claim that involvement in volunteer experiences increases participants' confidence, self-esteem and overall mental well being. In addition, research associated with this study finds that student volunteers often claim to achieve a better sense of self as a result of their volunteer efforts. We need to understand this correlation better. "How do we know that this is not related to other changes in their lives? Can it be that they were in a better place psychologically and that is why they volunteered?" More research is required to determine whether or not this is the case.

While this study found no correlation between religion and volunteerism, another recent study indicated that there is a positive correlation between actively being religious and increased volunteering.⁶ Furrow's study suggested the exact opposite of our results. This possible relationship of agnostics or non-re-

ligious individuals being more active in the NPO community should be further explored.

Another issue that could be addressed in future studies is the concern that the NPOs surveyed did not necessarily match the students who volunteered. In the future, one might try to arrange to survey the students at the organizations that are being surveyed.

In conclusion, while there are many theories about what causes people to volunteer and what sustains them in their volunteer positions, it is not entirely clear why such an improbable activity occurs so frequently. In a recent survey, 75% of adults said that volunteering was important but only 30% volunteer once a month or more. Although it is easy to see how volunteering is important, it seems to be difficult for people to initiate and participate.¹ This study shows that all participating students felt that volunteering was at least moderately important and most thought it to be very important. However, in this instance, 46.2% of the surveyed population reported that they volunteered once or more each month. It may be the case that the student population who responded to the survey is biased towards volunteering or have more incentive to volunteer because of its academic importance.

The fact is that smaller NPOs need help to be able to offer their clients better services. One must conclude that if students take the time to find volunteer experiences where there is a good fit, they will find a constructive avenue to fulfill their objectives, engage them, and feel enabled to utilize their expertise. NPOs, in return, need to be willing to invest in training volunteers so they will have happy, productive volunteer experiences. It is important that actual activity and not just ideas are interesting. NPOs need to stay fixed on student flexibility and unavailability at the same time. This researcher believes that NPOs willing to invest more time and energy into training students will reap increased benefits from the relationship.

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The survey used in this study is available for download from www.umich.edu/~umforum, or by contacting Dorothy, gotdorth@umich.edu.