

Understanding Volunteer Motivations: Recruiting and Retaining Youth and Young Adults

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Abstract

This research analysis examines individuals' motivations to participate in volunteerism and identifies which motivations are linked to youth and young adults' participation. An understanding of youth and young adults' motives for volunteering can yield effective strategies for recruitment and retention to increase volunteer rates in the United States. There are three major elements of this research analysis. *First*, a brief account of the current trend of volunteerism in America includes the most recent statistical data proving youth and young adults volunteer the least and older adults volunteer the most. *Second*, the author details how functional theory both explains volunteer motives and birthed the tool used to measure and assess an individual's volunteer habits. Each of the six motivational functions for volunteering are described: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. The research reveals that individuals are most likely to have multiple motives influencing their level of volunteerism and community involvement. Career and values motives rank highest among youth and young adults. And *third*, the author asserts that the most successful and satisfying volunteer experience occurs when both the participant volunteer and the recipient benefit from the volunteer's service. Further discussion includes suggestions to successfully recruit and retain youth and young adults in volunteerism by creating opportunities that embrace and meet the six motivational functions tailored to a younger population. This analysis serves as a preliminary body of work that the author will extend at the graduate research level.

Introduction

In 2015, 62.6 million Americans age 16 and over volunteered; they contributed 7.9 billion hours of service, and their service was valued at \$184 billion. Of the 90% of Americans who wanted to volunteer, only 24.9% participated in volunteer activities (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2018; Yotoloulos, n.d). Volunteer activities include any activity done without pay with the purpose of helping someone else; another person, group, or organization benefits (Guntert, Srubel, Kals, & Wehner, 2016; Cornelis, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2013). The most recent statistical data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), covering the year September 2014 to September 2015, found that youth and young adults volunteered the least: ages 16-24 at 21.8 % and ages 25-34 at 22.3%. Older adults, ages 35-44 and 45-54, volunteered the most, at 28.9% and 28%, respectively.

Community organizations, the communities they serve, and society at large—all stand to benefit from volunteerism (Bastein, 2015; Stukas, Hoye, Nicholson, Brown, & Aisbett, 2016). According to Stukas, Hoye, Nicholson, Brown, and Aisbett (2016):

Volunteers secure career and esteem benefits, recipients obtain much-needed services, organizations work more effectively within limited budgets, and communities develop social capital. Thus, the promotion of volunteering is often a feature of national and local government policymaking. However, recruitment of volunteers represents a continuing challenge facing non-profit organizations, especially in episodic volunteerism and a decrease in steady weekly contributions of time and effort. (pp. 112-113)

The importance of volunteering has been emphasized and encouraged by recent U.S. presidents through the creation of programs, public speeches, and policy implementation. In 2009, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act was passed into law to increase and support initiatives for service and volunteering, with a special emphasis on volunteering and service among young people (Nesbit & Brudney, 2010). Most research focuses on reasons people *do not* volunteer. In the present analysis, the author investigated reasons people *do* volunteer, with the intent to identify specific reasons for youth and young adults' participation in volunteerism. With such insight, suggestions can be crafted and initiatives can be developed to increase participation rates of youth and young adults based on what motivates them to volunteer instead of what does not (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 2016).

Numerous factors affect people's level of volunteerism; however, motivation is one of the most studied variables (Chacon, Gutierrez, Sauto, Vecina, & Perez, 2017; Guntert et al., 2016). While many theories and explanations examine volunteer motives, only the functional analysis framework is considered here because it birthed the most widely used instrument, recognized as the standard, to assess volunteer motivation: the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (Chacon et al., 2017; Gage & Thapa, 2012). This analysis provides an introduction and dissection of the six functions served by volunteering according to functional theory: values, understanding, social, career, enhancement, and protective (Chacon et al., 2017; Guntert et al., 2016; Cornelis et al., 2013). The findings reveal that individuals are most likely to have multiple motives influencing their level of volunteerism and community involvement. Career and values motives rank highest among youth and young adults. The author's premises are that volunteer opportunities should be created that embrace the six motivational functions and that those opportunities should be tailored to a younger population in order to increase their participation. The author concludes that volunteer recruitment and retention are positively correlated to the degree to which the volunteer experience meets the motivational function(s) of the volunteer.

Literature Review

Functional Theory: Why People Volunteer

Individuals find satisfaction in their volunteer experience and ultimately decide to continue volunteering if a match is made between the individual's personal interests and the degree to which the volunteer experience fulfills those interests. If volunteers get what they want out of the time they invest, they are more likely to keep investing (Nesbit & Brudney, 2010; Bastein, 2015; Guntert et al. 2016; Stukas, Hoye et al., 2016; Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016). The functional approach is the most influential psychological approach to

volunteering; it claims individuals can adopt the same attitudes or be involved in the same behaviors even though these attitudes or behaviors may serve very different psychological functions (Guntert et al., 2016).

Volunteer Functions Inventory

The VFI was developed in 1998 by Clary et al. to measure the six motivational functions: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016; Bastein, 2015; Cornelis et al., 2013). The VFI is a 30-item measurement tool assessing reasons to volunteer.

Values: The values motivation is rooted in “being useful for society and doing something for others” (Bocsi, Fenyés, & Markos, 2017, p. 120). Individuals most frequently report their altruistic (other-oriented) attitude and their desire to help others as the most important motivation for volunteering (Bastein, 2015; Chacon et al., 2017; Guntert et al., 2016; Strickhouser et al., 2014; Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016).

Understanding: Individuals motivated by understanding have the desire to learn, practice, and enhance knowledge and skills in addition to learning about the world and other people (Chacon et al., 2017; Guntert et al., 2016; Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016).

Social: Socially motivated volunteers are propelled into volunteerism due to the influence of other people and a concern for social rewards and recognition (Bocsi et al., 2017; Guntert et al., 2016). The desire to “strengthen bonds” with others serves as a form of peer pressure to be involved (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016).

Career: Career motivations are those focused on obtaining specific knowledge, skills, and experiences related to a professional or academic area of interest (Bocsi et al., 2017; Chacon et al., 2017; Johnson, 2015). Once that has been accomplished, the volunteer’s hope is that the volunteer experience(s) will translate to the best possible employment opportunities (Jardim & Silva, 2018; Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016). Sometimes referred to as career-related, resume-building volunteering, this is a new type of volunteering in which individuals use their volunteer experiences to create cultural and social capital that can be converted into material capital in the form of higher wages and better jobs (Bocsi et al., 2017).

Protective: Protective motivations are oriented to address or escape the personal problems of the volunteer (Chacon et al., 2017; Guntert et al., 2016). In addition, a volunteer may be motivated to help less fortunate populations due to the volunteer’s feeling of guilt for being more fortunate (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016).

Enhancement: The goal of the enhancement motive is to feel better about oneself by boosting self-esteem; the ego dictates the decision to volunteer as the individual wants to be needed by others (Chacon et al., 2017; Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016; Guntert et al., 2016).

Multidimensional Motivations

Individuals have different reasons for becoming involved in volunteerism and civic engagement (Guntert et al., 2016; Stebbins & Graham, 2004; Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016). The six motivations assessed by the VFI are not mutually exclusive, but rather “a volunteer may be motivated by different motivations simultaneously, and these motivations may change over time” (Chacon et al., 2017, p. 307). As a result, it is valuable

to understand the multiple motives that influence an individual's decision to begin volunteering and to sustain the behavior (Cornelis et al., 2013).

Stukas, Snyder, and Clary (2016) determined that “volunteers who have strong needs to express and to act on their personal values may be easiest to attract and to sustain” (p. 249). Research conducted by Stukas, Snyder, and Clary (2016) and Cornelis et al. (2013) found that other-oriented motivations produced greater persistence among volunteers; subsequently, volunteers who were more concerned with helping others than helping themselves were more likely to display extra-role behaviors (going beyond what was expected). Stukas, Hoyer, et al. (2016) recommended that organizations target individuals with other-oriented motivation; however, organizations should still accept individuals who have self-oriented motivations integrated into their decision to volunteer. For example, nothing is wrong with the dual benefit achieved when young adults gain volunteer experience to enhance their appeal to employers while simultaneously doing a good deed for someone else (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014).

Key Motives for Youth and Young Adults

There is an assumption that young people are failing their country by not being engaged in community affairs. The youth and young adults of today and of recent generations are “labelled as apathetic, antisocial and absorbed in themselves” (Jardim & Silva, 2018, p. 1). As a result, they are not involved in volunteerism, community service, or civic engagement (Lorentson, 2016). Furthermore, as young people transition into adulthood, they are not volunteering at an increased rate; they are volunteering less (Hill & Den Dulk, 2013). Instead of assuming the worst of young people, those organizations and people who seek to engage youth should view them as “civic change agents”: a different perspective on the population may lead to a different approach to engaging and empowering them to serve as “active participants” in their lives and their community (Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, 2016).

Jardim and Silva (2018) found that young people are primarily focused on the individual benefits they can gain personally and professionally. Furthermore, young people are captivated by new volunteer opportunities that are less formal, that have an unconventional twist to civic and political participation; older traditional volunteer activities and roles have little to no appeal to the population reported to volunteer the least (Jardim & Silva, 2018; Bocsi et al., 2017; Moore, Hope, Eisman, & Zimmerman, 2016). Research has shown “young Americans want the chance to make a difference and learn new skills, not work in the back office stuffing envelopes” (Nesbit & Brudney, 2010, p. 110).

The research literature remains consistent: the main driving force behind youth and young adult volunteerism is *self*. Young people are looking to satisfy their need for self-knowledge, self-development and self-gratification (Jardim & Silva, 2018). The prospect of acquiring better jobs and higher earnings motivates young people more than older people. However, young people want to help others and their community too; humanitarian and altruistic values are important and do influence their volunteer decisions (Bocsi et al., 2017). Organizations can adjust their tactics to encourage youth and young adult participation according to the research (Strickhouser, Kleinberger, & Wright, 2014); recruitment messages should be tailored specifically to attract the targeted population (Stukas, Snyder and Clary, 2016).

Discussion

Young people have a mix of motivations urging them into the volunteer role even if self-interest stands out the most. Ultimately, they are neither purely motivated by self or purely motivated by others; the younger generations deserve more credit and recognition for the complexity of their decision making. An argument can be made that a mix of motivating factors enhances the likelihood a volunteer will both do more than expected and experience the most satisfaction. Furthermore, the decision to volunteer could stem from motivations to serve the needs of self, but the additional giving beyond the expected volunteer role could stem from motivations to serve others (Stukas, Snyder and Clary, 2016). In such a case, all parties involved benefit from the dual motivation of the volunteer.

There is no definitive way to predict or determine whether an individual will offer their time and their efforts as a volunteer. There is no definitive motivation to explain the exact reason an individual decides to volunteer. Ultimately, the research has not yet identified a single best strategy to recruit and retain volunteers. When deciding to volunteer or not to volunteer, people have many motivations, functions, and factors to consider, and it is best to seek to understand, to respect, to accept, to employ, and to not judge an individual's motivations for volunteering.

Recommendations for the Near Term

A volunteer program that appeals to the inclinations of contemporary teenagers and young adults could take the form of a program that pairs young adult community leaders and advocates with high school students who serve as leaders within their schools and/or communities. There are three key components to such a program. First, the program must train future leaders in the youth population. Second, it will continue to develop existing older leaders in the young adult population. Third, iron sharpens iron: experienced leaders and rising leaders must lead together to make each other better leaders. To initiate the program, the organizer will gather several young adults, ages 21 to 35, to participate in the program as leadership and civic engagement mentors. Then, the organizer and mentors will become involved with local high school principals, counselors, and social workers to identify high school students to participate in the program in a mentee role as community leaders-in-training. The students will be eligible for admission into the program by either (a) a nomination by a school employee, (b) a nomination by a community member, including family, or (c) a self-submitted application.

Once young adult and high school participants have been accepted into the program, pairings will be made, *mentor + mentee*, based on shared interests for community engagement and volunteerism. Other factors will be taken into consideration as well, after proper assessment via an initial in-take form from each program participant. Each mentor-mentee pair will work together to locate organizations to volunteer with and to participate in community engagement opportunities; no one will work alone or make decisions without input from another participant. T. Miller, an administrator at Methodist University, shared her suggestions for the next steps:

We need to find out what young people are interested in. Then we can match their interests with the community volunteer opportunities that [pique] their interests. If you do that, then young people will be more likely to stick with the volunteering.

Also, someone needs to follow-up with those students to see how [the volunteer experience] is going. (personal communication, April 30, 2018)

The proposed program has the advantage that the youthful participants contribute to defining the nature of their volunteer efforts.



Volunteers helping out for charity. ID 211807. *Raw Pixel*. Royalty-free personal [non-commercial] use license. Retrieved from <https://www.rawpixel.com/image/211807/happy-volunteers>

Long-Term Recommendations

Pritzker and Richards-Schuster (2016) called on the social work profession and social workers “to lead research and practice in the area of youth civic engagement... Increased attention to promoting youth civic engagement is needed in the profession’s core journals” (p. 217). One year prior, the same proclamation was made by Richards-Schuster and Pritzker (2015): “we argue that social work should play a central role in promoting youth participation in civic engagement” (p. 90). The social work profession views everyone from the strengths-based perspective first, then utilizes those identified strengths to improve the quality of life for the individual and ultimately for the community as well. It is because of this technique that the profession can take the youth population, which is currently derided for their lack of civic engagement, and reveal the potential young people have to thrust themselves into community involvement. Maybe, if social work professionals are the ones who highlight the good offered by young people, then maybe those professionals can be the ones to get them involved. The dialogue can shift from “young people as problems rather than assets” to young people “interested in and

capable of influencing decision making that affects their lives and creating sustainable community change” (Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, 2016, p. 217).

Conclusion

The research may not provide a clear-cut answer to the question of how to recruit and retain young people as volunteers, or any age group for that matter, but the research does indicate best practices to shape efforts to increase volunteerism. In order to both retain current volunteers and recruit new volunteers, the focus must be to provide opportunities for younger volunteers to match their needs, whether those needs are about self or about others. Both motivations are valid and important. Volunteer opportunities need to be revamped and redesigned to attract a population that has taken greater ownership over crafting unique volunteer experiences that serve themselves just as much as they serve others. Everyone is capable of serving as a volunteer and doing the work of a volunteer. Consequently, everyone should be intentional in their volunteer role and make the act of serving others valuable, meaningful, and functional.

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