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BARRIERS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS IN NEW YORK CITY TO ENGAGE IN VOLUNTEERING

Joanna Padgett Herz

In 2015, 24.9% of American residents volunteered to do charitable work, amounting to 7.9 billion hours of service. 13% of those volunteers were 16-19 years old, and only 9% of them were 20-24 years old. Consistently people age 16-24 are the least likely to volunteer in America (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In New York City, there are many people in need and plenty of volunteering opportunities. As of 2013, there are 61,691 different 501(c)(3) public charities in New York City (Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2013). With over 63,000 homeless individuals and 43.5% living under the NYC Government poverty line, there are many people who could benefit from an increase in the volunteer population (Coalition for the Homeless, 2018; Mayor’s Office of Operations of The City of New York, 2018). This study focuses on the needs of college students who face barriers to engaging in volunteer efforts. By identifying and minimizing those barriers, we can increase the volunteer workforce coming out of colleges. By doing this we create a symbiotic relationship between those who benefit from volunteer efforts, and the college students volunteering.

Volunteering can be extremely beneficial. It can increase employability, socialization, support, mental and physical health, satisfaction, trust of peers, and aid in identity building (Haski-Leventhal & Cnaan, 2009; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Ohmer, 2007; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Wilson & Musick, 2000). In short, volunteering can greatly increase one’s human capital. However, being able to volunteer requires a high amount of human capital in the first place. Volunteer work hinges on (1) work that requires human capital, (2) social behaviors that require social capital, and (3) ethical work that requires cultural capital (Smith, 1981). Additionally, one’s level of education is the most consistent predictor of volunteering (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996; Sundeen & Raskoff, 1994).

On top of a need for marketable skills, one needs a strong social network. Face-to-face invitations to volunteer are much more effective than impersonal appeals such as mass media (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994). Those with higher amounts of social connection, such as those in higher socioeconomic status’ are more likely to be invited to volunteer by a friend, and thus more likely to say yes and continue to volunteer (Wilson & Musick, 1997). In 2015 The Bureau of Statistics found that the group that was most likely to volunteer, were those who were employed part-time. Part-time employees exist within a perfect balancing act for volunteering: social connections vs. time. They have those social connections via a job, but do not have full time obligations to that job. This allows them to be recruited for volunteering, and to have the time to say yes.

College in America is often designed to increase a student’s human capital, social network, and activities outside the classroom. So why aren’t college students volunteering at the same rate as other age groups? What may separate those with part-time
jobs from college students, is economic capital. The cost of college has increased by more than 25% from 2008 to 2019 (Ma et al., 2019, November 6). Students may be interested in volunteering, but have obligations to part-time work, or scholarship programs to help pay for college.

If college students appear to be in the exact right position for volunteering, why aren’t they? Is it a lack of motivation, time, money, or opportunity? These questions have not historically been researched. This study seeks to find these answers.

**METHODS**

This study was carried out via survey distributed in three different sociology classrooms at St. John’s University, in Queens, New York. One research methods class, one Introduction to Sociology, and one sociology elective course. The survey contained 19 demographic questions, and two branching paths based on a student’s previous answers. One path contained 16 questions, while the other contained 13 questions.

It should be noted that St. John’s University is a Vincentian Catholic University. As the institution’s mission states, their “Community service programs combine with reflective learning to enlarge the classroom experience. Wherever possible, we devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the causes of poverty and social injustice and to encourage solutions that are adaptable, effective, and concrete” (St. John’s University, n.d.). This may skew the results.

Among the classes the survey was distributed in, one class was an introductory class, one was a required class for upperclassmen, and one was an elective. There were 42 participants. 73.8% of respondents were female, 23.8% were male, and 2.4% were non-binary/fluid. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22. 42.9% were white, 28.6% were African American/Black. 14.3% were Asian/Pacific Islander. 7.1% were Hispanic or Latino. 7.2% were Indian, West Indian, or preferred not to say.

**RESULTS**

Results show that students with higher economic status were able to volunteer more. The median yearly income of respondent’s parents for infrequent volunteers was $75,000 to $99,999, while for frequent volunteers it was $100,000 to $149,999. Those who earned $30,000 to $40,000 in scholarships were most likely to frequently volunteer, followed by $20,000 to $30,000 and $5,000 to $10,000. Both those with no scholarship and those who have a full ride, were all non-frequent volunteers. Out of 20 responses, 65% noted economic reasons for being a non-frequent volunteer. Frequent volunteers were more likely to indicate that they had volunteered previously, and that their immediate family volunteered frequently (Figure 1).
### Previous Volunteering vs. Volunteer Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous volunteer experience</th>
<th>Elementary school; Middle school; High school</th>
<th>How often do you currently volunteer</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Non-frequent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within I previously volunteered when I was in</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within How often do you currently volunteer</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within I previously volunteered when I was in</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within How often do you currently volunteer</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have never volunteered previous to college</td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within I previously volunteered when I was in</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within How often do you currently volunteer</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school; High school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within I previously volunteered when I was in</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within How often do you currently volunteer</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within I previously volunteered when I was in</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within How often do you currently volunteer</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Previous Volunteering vs. Volunteer Frequency*
Figure 2. Motivations for Volunteering

Degree of agreement indicated by participant (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)
Frequent volunteers were more likely to say that their values and beliefs motivated them to volunteer, while were more likely to believe that others were motivated by putting it on their resume (Figure 2).

Overall, students who started off with higher economic status were more likely to volunteer than those who did not. Students who do not frequently volunteer were most likely to be hindered by a job or internship. However, non-frequent volunteers indicated they would be interested in volunteering and were even more likely to say that it is one’s responsibility to volunteer for others. Non-frequent volunteers also were less likely to be asked to volunteer by peers, to have volunteered previously in life, or to have immediate family that volunteers frequently. Yet, they often indicated an admiration for volunteering and a wish to do it. These results show that non-frequent volunteers were not likely to have social networks that encourage volunteering, and/or their economic situations did not allow them the time to volunteer. This indicated that there is a group of college students who were interested in volunteering, but lacked the resources to engage in it, namely time and money. To encourage volunteering, students need ways to build it into their existing schedules. Colleges should work to create thoughtful, easy to engage in service programs.

**PROJECT PLAN**

My project was an undergraduate sociology class at St. John’s University. This sociology class, entitled *Sociological Perspectives of Volunteerism and the Non-profit*, aimed to educate students on the socioeconomic dynamics of volunteerism, social issues in volunteering, and the ethical dynamics of the non-profit industry. It was designed as an “unconventional course”: a term at St. John’s used for classes where part of required class time takes place off campus. In this course, once a month, during the class time, students would be brought to do service for an organization in the area. During this service their goals would be to, participate in productive service, and observe other volunteers from a sociological perspective.

Because of the time and bureaucratic labor that getting a course approved at St. John’s would take, I decided to perform a pilot project. This pilot project took on two forms: a leadership workshop for the APO service fraternity on St. John’s campus, and a guest lecture for a Social Justice Theory class. During the APO class, I went over the factors involved in motivation to volunteer, aiming to increase their understanding of those factors based on my research. Based on pre and post surveys, I was able to increase their understanding on their ability to encourage others to volunteer, that there are self-serving benefits to volunteering, and the role that socioeconomic privileges play.

For the Social Justice Theory class, I did a sample lesson from the class I designed. This class revolved around the connection between protestant, capitalist, and volunteer ethics. I found that students were able and wanted to connect theory to their own volunteering experiences. However, this should be taken anecdotally as the class was conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic, over a video conference.

**CONCLUSION**

Volunteering is an important aspect of modern capitalist society. It is one of the main ways that vulnerable populations obtain necessary resources. As long as America decides to administer social protections via private non-profit organizations, volunteers will be needed. College students appear to be great candidates for that work. They benefit tremendously from the skills, experiences, and connections that can be cultivated through service. But, as this study has shown, they lack the resources to do so. If we are ever going to increase student volunteering, we need to lower the cost of education. Students are working part time jobs in an effort to support themselves and pay off student loans. With those economic barriers in place it may be unreasonable for them to engage in much needed volunteer work.
At the time of writing this, the COVID-19 virus is forcing us to stay at home, away from our usual social lives. I worry about what this means for volunteer rates going forward. Will the American people associate those in poverty with disease and avoid face to face contact? Or will they rise to the occasion and volunteer to help once this is all over? Only time will tell.

REFERENCES


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REFERENCES

Joanna Padgett Herz is currently pursuing a Masters in Sociology, studying the history of discourse on homelessness at the United Nations. She is the United Nations Advocacy Coordinator for the Institute of Global Homelessness, working closely with other non-governmental organizations and member nations to end homelessness at the global level. She serves as a member of the executive committee for the UN NGO Working Group to End Homelessness and served as the 2020 Commission for Social Development Civil Society Chair. Padgett Herz was previously the UN Intern Representative for the Congregation of the Mission, and a Project ID Caseworker at St. John’s Bread and Life.