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**Reasons for and Barriers to Participating in Volunteerism and Service:  
A Comparison of Ohio Youth in Grades 5-8 and 9-12**

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**Abstract**

*The authors analyzed existing data investigating volunteerism and service among Ohio youth. Principle components analysis resulted in four factors explaining respondents' reasons for providing volunteerism/service for both grade levels: Grades 5-8: 1) Adult and Peer Pressure; 2) Adult Encouragement; 3) Altruistic Reasons; and 4) Spiritual Reasons; Grades 9-12: 1) Personal and Altruistic Importance; 2) Education and Career Advancement; 3) Parent, Teacher, and/or Mentor Encouragement; and 4) Social and Peer Influences. Data analysis resulted in three factors explaining barriers to volunteerism/service, again for both grade levels: Grades 5-8: 1) Low Personal Interest; 2) Personal Challenges; and 3) Weak Connectedness to Volunteerism; Grades 9-12: 1) Low Personal Interest; 2) Weak Connectedness to Volunteerism; and 3) Time Constraints. Volunteer administrators from Ohio and states with similar school demographics should consider these reasons and barriers when designing or restructuring youth volunteerism and service programs.*

**Key Words:**

youth, volunteerism, community service, reasons, barriers, Ohio

## Introduction

Volunteerism and community service are both contemporary and historical social phenomena in American society. Since colonial times, Americans have gone beyond normal expectations and familial responsibilities to help their fellow citizens (Ellis & Noyes, 1990.) Traditionally, the American family has had the major responsibility for instilling in young people the concepts of volunteerism and community service.

However, beginning in the early twentieth century and especially during the past two decades, this responsibility has increasingly fallen upon other societal institutions as well. According to Maughns-Pugh (1996), "The relationship of attachment between local communities and the schools serving their youth is pedagogically critical" (p. 48) Volunteerism and community service are both critical strategies through which our nation's youths become integrally attached to their surrounding communities. In a national survey conducted by the Independent Sector (1992a), 61% of 12-17 year olds, and 58% of 14 – 17 year olds, volunteered in the past 12 months. Almost a decade later, The Independent Sector (2002a) found that volunteering by U.S. high school students in 2001 reached its highest level in the past 50 years.

Nurturing a spirit and belief in volunteerism and community service in youth is a major goal of many educational and non-profit institutions and organizations. Yet, Safrit (2002) noted that:

. . . as adults, it is often challenging for us to even approach teens; we have developed a societal stereotype that teens are, by definition, rebellious and nonconforming and have little sincere interest in anything but themselves and their immediate needs. . . . we often subconsciously expect teens to fail in following-through on their responsibilities and commitments, again

assuming that they will redirect their energies and attentions to anything that is more immediate and more exciting for them personally. And . . . we subconsciously resist delegating to them true power and authority to perform, instead constantly shadowing their efforts and suggesting alternative methods and options based upon the clichéd, "our experience as adults." (pp. 21-22)

In spite of these observations and assertions, little empirical data exist describing youth service and volunteerism. Rigorous analytical research conducted with large sub-segments of America's youth population would serve to greatly enhance volunteer administrators' and managers' understanding of the reasons and motivations that youth decide to participate in volunteerism and community service, as well as the barriers youth themselves perceive hinder or impede their participation.

## Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this research was to describe and compare reasons for and barriers to participating in volunteerism and service by Ohio youth in grades 5-12. The researchers used historical data collected originally in 1996 (Safrit, King, & Burcsu, 1998). The population for the original study was approximately 1.8 million 4<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> graders in Ohio public schools in 1995 (as reported by the Ohio Department of Education). Based on an average of 25 students per classroom, the researchers estimated there were approximately 50,000 4<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms in Ohio's public schools. Since names of individual students were not available, the researchers used cluster sampling (with school classrooms as the sample unit) to draw a random sample of classrooms for each grade level (Kish, 1967). The accessible population was all 4<sup>th</sup>

- 12<sup>th</sup> classrooms as of 1996 which were on a computerized list provided by the O.D.E. The list was organized by grade level, with all individual classes for a specific grade level listed alphabetically by teacher's last name. Based upon Krejcie and Morgan's formula (1970) which utilizes a 5% risk of an extreme sample, the researchers selected the appropriate sample size of classrooms for each grade level and randomly selected classrooms from the computerized list.

In 1995, Safrit et al. used two 16 item questionnaires to collect data from grades 4 – 8 and 9-12. Both questionnaires employed vocabulary and response categories appropriate (i.e., "yes" or "no") for the respective grade level. Experts in the field of youth service and volunteerism served as a panel of experts to establish the validity of the questionnaires. Based upon the panel's suggestions, the researchers made minor wording changes to the questionnaires. Overall questionnaire development followed recommendations by Rea and Parker (1997).

Both questionnaires were organized into five sections corresponding to the study objectives. Section 1 investigated overall levels and types of volunteerism and service by respondents. Section 2 investigated service as a part of respondents' school work, and Section 3 investigated service as a part of out-of-school clubs and organizations, as well as service performed individually by respondents. Section 4 investigated motivations for and barriers to volunteerism and service by respondents, while section 5 investigated respondents' personal demographics. This article focuses upon post-collection analysis of the data investigating youth motivations for and barriers to volunteerism collected in Sections 4 of the two questionnaires.

Safrit et al. (1995) conducted a pilot study to establish the questionnaires' content validity. Five classrooms (not a part of the

study sample) participated in the pilot tests. As a result of these pilot tests, the researchers made minor changes to both questionnaires.

Safrit et al. (1998) also conducted a field study using the test-retest method to establish the reliability of the questionnaires. Eight 4<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and ten 9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grader students (who were not in the classrooms that were part of the study sample) participated in the field study. The researchers administered the questionnaire to each student on two separate occasions, allowing approximately three weeks between administrations. All items in both questionnaires demonstrated minimum reliabilities of 60%.

Principals of each school with participating classrooms received letters asking permission to conduct the study. Selected classroom teachers received a separate packet that included a study information sheet, a parental permission form, an instruction sheet for administering the questionnaires and 35 copies of the appropriate questionnaire. Classrooms had approximately 25 students; however, actual class sizes ranged from 18 - 30. Researchers sent 35 questionnaires to ensure enough for each student in the classroom. Teachers sent parental permission slips home with students prior to administering questionnaires. Teachers administered questionnaires to students whose parents returned signed permission forms and returned completed questionnaires to the researchers. The initial deadline for returned questionnaires was November 30, 1996. The researchers sent reminder post cards to teachers who had not returned questionnaires by December 2, 1996. Teachers received phone calls in early January, 1997 if there was still no response.

The overall response rate was 58%. Response rates for individual grades ranged from 31% (4<sup>th</sup> grade) to 73% (5<sup>th</sup> grade).

Due to the low response rate for 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the researchers did not conduct subsequent analysis of data from 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. No attempt was made to follow up with non-responding classrooms.

The 477 responding classrooms resulted in 11, 324 usable questionnaires. Sample statistics including frequencies and correlations were calculated using SPSS version 12.0. Factor analysis using the principal components model was used to identify major components underlying the barriers to participating in volunteerism/service for both grade groups (5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Based upon the two correlation matrixes (several correlations above |.30|), Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (p<.001), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (.67 for the 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade group, and .75 for the 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade group), the data appeared appropriate for

factor analysis. The analysis provided a parsimonious number of components (3 for each grade group) that could be used to represent the relationships among the sets of interrelated variables.

Two criteria were used to determine the number of components to be extracted. First, only components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were considered in the analysis. Second, a scree plot of the component eigenvalues was used to identify breaks or discontinuity in determining the number of components. The components were rotated using a Varimax rotation method with Kaiser Normalization to aid in the interpretation of the components. Stevens (1992) suggests using loadings of .40 absolute when determining which items are of practical importance in loading on a component.

**Table 1**  
*Rotated Component Matrix of Barriers to Volunteering for Grades 5 – 8*

Item	Component Loadings			Communality
	1	2	3	
It wouldn't be fun	.74			.28
I don't care	.72			.40
I want to spend time doing things I like	.53			.42
I helped once, but didn't like it	.50			.25
None of my friends help others	.45			.45
I just moved here		.66		.37
My parents won't let me help		.62		.26
I don't know how to help		.56		.32
Transportation is a problem			.67	.55
I don't have enough time to help			.63	.53
No one asked me to help			.45	.50
Eigenvalues	1.90	1.24	1.21	
% of Variance	17.3	11.2	11.0	

**Findings**

The researchers identified three factors describing barriers to volunteering for both grade levels (Tables 1 and 2). Barriers identified for grades 5 – 8 include: Component 1) Low personal interest; Component 2) Weak connectedness to volunteerism; and Component 3) Personal challenges. The barriers identified for

grades 9 – 12 are vary similar to those found for grades 5 – 8 and include: Component 1) Low personal interest; Component 2) Weak connectedness to volunteering; and Component 3) Time constraints. Together the three grade 5 – 8 components accounted for 40% of the total variance, and the three grade 9 – 12 components accounted for 34% of the variance.

**Table 2**  
*Rotated Component Matrix of Barriers to Volunteering for Grades 9 – 12*

Item	Component Loadings			Communality
	1	2	3	
It wouldn't be fun	.77			.59
I'm simply not interested	.76			.58
I don't care	.69			.48
I want to spend leisure time doing things I like	.62			.41
None of my friends are involved	.50			.32
I don't know how to get involved		.57		.33
My parents won't let me help		.52		.28
Transportation is a problem		.46		.29
No one asked me to get involved		.46		.25
I don't feel one person can make a difference		.43		.22
I just moved here		.40		.17
I don't have time because of homework			.79	.62
I don't have time due to extracurricular activities			.64	.41
No time because of work expected at home			.53	.38
Don't have time because of job			.47	.25
Eigenvalues	2.45	1.73	1.65	
% of Variance	14.4	10.2	9.7	

**Table 3**  
*Rotated Component Matrix of Reasons for Volunteering for Grades 5-8*

Item	Component Loadings				Communality
	1	2	3	4	
A lot of free time	.59				.37
To make friends	.58				.43
My friends help others	.54				.39
It gives me something to do	.50				.29
To fit into a group	.49				.34
To make a good grade	.44				.34
Parents encouraged me		.66			.49
Important to my parents		.60			.40
Teachers encouraged me		.56			.46
Someone asked me to help		.40			.20
Wanted to help others			.67		.45
Helping others makes me feel good			.64		.43
It was fun			.48		.37
To learn new things			.48		.44
My parents made me		.44	-.47		.46
Place of worship made me				.72	.57
Place of worship encouraged me				.65	.55
Eigenvalues	2.1	1.9	1.8	1.2	
Percent of Variance	12.3	11.1	10.7	7.0	41.0

The researchers identified four factors describing reasons for volunteering for both grade levels (Tables 3 and 4). Reasons identified for grades 5 – 8 include: Component 1) adult and peer pressure; Component 2) adult encouragement; Component 3) altruistic reasons; and, Component 4) spiritual reasons. Reasons identified for grades 9 – 12 are very similar to those found for grades 5 – 8 and include:

Component 1) personal and altruistic importance; Component 2) educational and career advancement; Component 3) parent, teacher, and/or mentor encouragement; Component 4) social and peer influences. Together the four grade 5 – 8 components accounted for 41% of the total variance, and the four grade 9 – 12 components accounted for 31.1% of the variance.

**Table 4**  
***Rotated Component Matrix of Reasons for Volunteering for Grades 9 - 12***

Item	Component Loadings				Communality
	1	2	3	4	
Important to me	.64				.44
It helps me gain new perspective on things	.59				.42
I feel compassion toward those in need	.57				.34
Makes me feel good about myself	.54				.32
I wanted to give something back	.54				.32
Important to the people I respect	.53				.35
It was fun and I enjoy the work	.48				.34
It gives me something worthwhile to do	.44				.30
It looks good on my resume		.69			.56
It looks good on a college application		.65			.50
To make contacts and help my career		.60			.42
It helps me to explore career options		.57			.50
A requirement to graduate		.40			.26
Important to my parents			.59		.36
My parents encouraged me			.51		.25
Someone asked me to help			.42		.21
My teachers encouraged me			.41		.25
I have a lot of free time				.53	.29
My friends help others				.50	.30
To fit into a group				.47	.27
It helps me to deal with my own problems				.45	.28
Eigenvalues	3.5	2.5	2.1	1.9	
Percent of Variance	10.9	7.7	6.6	5.9	31.1

**Conclusions and Implications**

The reader is cautioned about generalizations of the findings beyond Ohio due to the study’s exploratory nature. The factors identified for each grade range largely support and reinforce existing literature regarding holistic youth reasons

for and barriers to participating in volunteerism and service. However, the study findings provide more focused insights into both shared and unique reasons for and barriers to volunteerism/service between the early teen years represented by grades 5-8, and the senior teen years in

grades 9-12.

The reasons for volunteerism identified at both grade levels of “adult and peer pressure”, “adult encouragement”, and “parent, teacher, and/or mentor encouragement” emphasize the critical role that adult role models play in encouraging young people to volunteer. The authors believe that these factors cannot be overstated; youth learn best not from what adults say, but what adults actually do. Thus, whether a parent or guardian at home, a classroom teacher, a community youth program professional, or a neighbor or other adult acquaintance, adult role models serve as important positive catalysts and examples of citizens engaged in their communities through volunteer service for both pre-teen and teenage youth. The authors would suggest that to maximize upon this research finding, the most effective infrastructure for youth volunteerism and community service may be through youth-adult partnerships, i.e., youth and adults working together as equal peers to address through volunteerism challenges facing their communities. Such partnerships are supported by both best practices and the literature (Brendtro & Bacon, 1995; Long, Kressley, & Poulsen, n.d.; Safrit, 2002; Youth Service America, 1994; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, n.d.) and not only build a commitment to service among youth, but also strengthens in them important leadership skills and aspirations.

The study factors identified at both grade levels of “altruistic reasons” and “personal and altruistic importance” again are prevalent in adult volunteerism literature (Shure, 1991; Independent Sector, 1996b) but less frequently cited for youth volunteerism. The Independent Sector (1996) identified “compassion toward people in need” as one of the most reasons teens cited for volunteering, while Spoto (1999) cited “to learn to be helpful and kind” as one of five highest

factors in influencing 4-H youth to volunteer. Personal philosophies that we profess as adults have their origins anchored in the personal values, belief systems, and experiences to which we are exposed as youth growing up in homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Consequently, adults who serve as role models in encouraging youth to volunteer not only demonstrate a commitment to a positive social behavior, but also transfer less tangible beliefs and values to youth relating to each individual’s role in supporting and aiding those less fortunate, and those in need. Service learning (the pedagogical approach that links classroom subject matter, volunteer service, and student reflection upon that service) has been designed from its inception to instill in youth larger shared cultural values of civic and social responsibility while reinforcing a personal commitment to volunteerism and community service. It is noteworthy that altruistic-focused reasons for volunteering were identified for both the 5-8 and 9-12 grade levels. After approximately two decades of encouraging holistic youth development wherein the individual student in the formal school classroom is connected to both that student in his/her home setting, as well as that student’s involvement in other community based youth programs, American society is hopefully beginning to see the results of an altruistic emphasis shared among all three contexts that refocuses today’s youth upon historical tenets upon which our nation was founded. These tenets include our individual responsibilities toward promoting the well being of our fellow citizens, our communities, and our nation through community service and volunteerism (Ellis & Noyes, 1990).

The factors identified for grades 9-12 of “educational and career advancement” and “social and peer influences” are not surprising considering the life stage at which

teenagers find themselves. Teens are very concerned with preparing for their future jobs and careers through appropriate education and training. Smith and Havercamp (1991) found that volunteerism by high-risk teenagers positively influenced their school grades, and Sauer (1991) concluded that volunteerism by students at risk helped the students “[turn] around a record of excessive absences and below grade level academic achievement” (p. 37). Spoto (1999) identified “to improve school grades/do better in school” and “to develop new career goals” as two important factors influencing youth respondents in Louisiana to volunteer. Safrit, Scheer and King (2001) suggested that “Volunteer opportunities can enhance the teen’s career exploration . . . and be included as part of building a strong college application or job resume” (p. 19). With today’s emphasis on workforce preparation and a technologically literate workforce, volunteerism and community service are excellent means through which older youth may explore possible jobs and career paths through real-life, hands-on experience. When combined with classroom vocational programs and career related coursework, volunteerism is an excellent learning strategy that effectively combines course content with the actual workplace for teens in an emotionally safe environment.

Additionally, teens are very concerned with fitting into the larger group while still demonstrating their individuality. Therefore, “social and peer influences” may relate to not only our society’s increasing emphasis on youth volunteerism and community service, but an interpersonal aspect as well. Safrit, Scheer and King (2001) suggested that “Teens are more willing to actively engage in mixed gender groups” (p. 19) wherein individuals of one gender are exposed to, and learn to collaborate with, peers of the other gender through structured volunteer activities. Such inter-gender peer

interaction promotes positive peer pressure wherein teens role model volunteer service to their friends and fellow students.

The reason for volunteering identified for early teens in grades 5-8 of “spiritual reasons” is somewhat surprising to the authors. The roles of an individual’s religious beliefs, as well as organized communities of faith to which they belong, upon adults as volunteers is well documented (Independent Sector, 1992b, 1996b, 2002b). However, the role of spirituality in youth volunteerism is less evident in the literature. The authors suggest that “spiritual reasons” identified by the study findings may be related to (1) our society’s increasing emphasis upon human spirituality (both through organized communities of faith and individual spiritual movements), and/or (2) the direct influence that parents and guardians have upon younger youth (as opposed to older teens) in exposing them to religious contexts. Hopefully, the ultimate outcome of either of these two aspects would be a youth (and eventual adult) who connects a personal commitment to helping others to their individual and shared religious beliefs, and visa versa.

The barriers identified of “low personal interest”, “personal challenges”, “weak connectedness to volunteerism”, and “time constraints” are all documented in the literature on barriers to adult volunteerism. MacKenzie and Moore (1994) discussed barriers to adult volunteerism related to the identified factors of time constraints (e.g., increasing demands from career and family) and poor connectivity to volunteerism (e.g., no one asking an individual to help.) Safrit and Merrill (2000) discussed management implications of several trends in volunteerism they identified. One trend identified the many challenges of our ever-increasingly busy and hectic lives in integrating volunteer commitments with personal, familial, and professional



responsibilities.

The study findings provide more focused insights into both shared and unique barriers to volunteerism/service between the early teen years represented by grades 5-8, and the senior teen years in grades 9-12. While the content of the barriers identified for youth volunteerism in this study are similar to many of those identified for adults, one must recognize that the contexts of these barriers for youth may differ drastically from those for adults.

“Low personal interest” and “weak connectedness to volunteerism” were barriers identified for both grade levels. The authors would suggest that these barriers may reflect youths’ perceptions that some volunteer programs are poorly planned or implemented, or fail to truly engage youth as active, meaningful partners in volunteer initiatives. Volunteer program administrators must avoid at all cost the appearance that youth are asked to volunteer for busywork simply to occupy their time, or that the tasks assigned to youth volunteers are not perceived by the youth as distasteful activities that adults prefer not to do. A “weak connectedness to volunteerism” may reflect the observation that youth with parents who volunteer tend to be more likely to volunteer as well (Independent Sector, 2002). Thus, youth from households or communities with little visible evidence of volunteer activities or accomplishments may lack a peer or adult role model to encourage them to volunteer. While service learning may be an effective method through which to introduce youth to volunteer service, youth would still benefit from a close friend, family member, or adult mentor to sustain their interest and initiative to volunteer.

The barrier identified for grades 9-12 of “time constraints” may reflect the increasing pressures of time commitments on many high school students. High schools offer many intra- and extra-curricular organiza-

tions and activities that compete for students’ time, energies and talents. While many high school students elect to join and participate in as many organizations and activities as possible, others may focus upon one organization or activity, and others may elect not to participate at all. So as to minimize the potential detrimental affects of this barrier, volunteer administrators should work closely with classroom teachers and school administrators to integrate into the school environment as many volunteer service opportunities as possible. Leaders and advisers of school clubs and organizations should be encouraged to suggest to student members that they perform at least one group service activity per semester. Entire grade levels could be encouraged to adopt a class volunteer service project that would benefit the entire school and its surrounding community. Volunteer organizations should be encouraged to work with school guidance counselors and administrators to post volunteer opportunities available to students in a prominent and conspicuous location. At the high school level, such volunteer opportunities would help students explore possible vocations and careers.

Volunteer administrators from Ohio (as well as states with similar school demographics) should consider both these reasons and barriers when designing or restructuring youth volunteerism and service programs. While the authors recognize that the study findings are based upon data collected in 1996, they would argue that volunteerism motivations and barriers faced by youth have not changed drastically in seven years. According to the Independent Sector (2002c), even today, “Several factors appear to encourage volunteering as a habit: the age when young people start to volunteer; the exposure to volunteering opportunities through religious, educational, or other institutions; and the role of positive

self-images and role models” (n.p.)

The authors would encourage administrators of volunteer programs to contact and engage educators, elected and informal civic leaders, parents and guardians, and young people themselves in active dialogue regarding their unique perceptions and opinions regarding the reasons and barriers discussed here. Only then will we as positive adult role models truly be able to best support youth in sustained volunteer service.

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