

**Youth Volunteers:
Effects of Influences, Motivations, and Receptivity on Volunteerism**

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Abstract

Administrators and managers of volunteer resources and policy planners exhibit a clear need to better understand the role and impact of youth volunteers. As non-profits, volunteer groups, youth programs, and nongovernmental organizations take on larger roles in contributing to local well-being, active collaborations between youth and adults is vital to the long-term success of meaningful volunteer efforts. The importance of youth volunteerism is particularly relevant in Florida, which is facing extensive population growth pressures, significant socio-demographic changes, and a growing youth population. This study of Florida youth explores the impact of motivations, influences, and receptivity on youth and their volunteerism.

Keywords:

volunteers, youth, motivations, receptivity, influences

Introduction

Historically, youth involvement in decision-making, problem solving and community action has received only limited attention, particularly in relation to the importance of youth motivation to volunteer (Safrit, Gliem, & Gliem, 2004) and the outcomes of youth volunteerism as a resiliency building factor (Kegler et al., 2005; Brennan, Barnett & Lesmeister, 2007; Brennan, 2008). However, recent trends suggest that youth have, and continue to play, increasingly important roles in the development of communities (Huber, Frommeyer, Weisenbach, & Sazama, 2003). It is therefore important for

both youth and community development professionals to explore potential effects of relevant youth demographics, motivational forces, and receptivity and barriers on youths' participation as community volunteers. As non-profits, volunteer groups, and nongovernmental organizations assume larger roles in contributing to local well being, active collaborations between youth and adult volunteers are vital to the long-term success of community development efforts. Equally important, the literature suggests that successful youth/adult partnerships encourage youth to develop the capacity to actively serve in organizations and transition into future

community leaders (Nitzberg, 2005; Safrit, 2002; Safrit, Scheer, & King, 2001).

Similarly, as service learning activities become a more standardized component of high school and college programs, (and in some cases serve as a requirement for scholarships) youth are increasingly encouraged to become lifelong volunteers. This volunteering is important in that both the community and youth benefit from their involvement by presenting opportunities for personal self-growth, skill enhancement, and leadership development that contribute to their overall educational experience (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Finally, volunteerism helps develop assets that enable youth to avoid problem behaviors (Connell & Kubisch, 2001; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, 1990).

This study examines youth volunteerism, specifically for frequency and level of participation in activities, and the motivational forces that affect youth volunteerism. The research focuses upon the question: *What are the motivations, influences, and barriers that shape active youth volunteerism?*

Volunteerism and Youth Development: The Resiliency Connection

Volunteerism is an important facet of community-building and leads effective adult-youth interaction. Activities such as religious services, volunteerism, and neighborhood meetings, are associated with the degree of motivation for adults to engage with youth (Scales et al., 2001). Scales et al. examined adults' relationships with youth outside of their own families to find that while large majorities of American adults (i.e., 70% or more) rated engagement behaviors "most important", rarely did ways of engaging become norms in their social networks. This has led to a gap between the social value attributed to engagement behavior and the social expectation of adults engaging with youth in ways that may

enhance the youths' resiliency and protect them against risk.

It is important to consider adult engagement with youth in the volunteer setting in order to bridge this gap between motivations toward volunteerism, youth resiliency, and adult engagement behavior for organizations in ways that will help them increase volunteerism and have positive youth development outcomes. These volunteer activities will lead to multiple benefits for communities and citizens of all ages, and particularly for youth needing to increase resilience against risk. Motivational forces have been identified in resiliency studies as a means of enhancing assets or resilience. In particular, involvement bonds and attachment bonds are critical qualities that help youth offset risk (Catalano, Kosterman, Hawkins, Newcomb, & Abbott, 1996).

Community youth development professionals may liken youth volunteerism to other self-actualization efforts leading to enhancing resilience. Volunteerism and community-building activities provide not only tangible benefits, but are also sources of close relationships and meaning in life that are necessary for positive youth development (Myers, 2000; Brennan, 2008). Therefore, youth benefit from volunteerism in a number of ways that promote positive youth development. Engagement and interaction with caring adults (other than parents) play significant roles in providing several developmental supports for youth that increase and promote youth well being.

The current wave of resiliency research focuses on the experiences that foster active civic engagement and encourage youth to pursue self-actualization, altruism, and sources of individual level strength that increase personal resiliency (Richardson, 2002). The connection between motivational forces, resiliency and volunteerism, therefore, is important to consider. One may explore and identify motivational forces and

obstacles identified by youth for volunteerism. These may help foster active participation in activities and determine whether certain motivational forces may have significant impact on youth engagement and participation.

The Role of Youth in Community Development

Youth/adult partnerships and the active role of youth in community development are currently being explored by researchers in both of the fields of youth development and community development, since both youth and community benefit (Barnett & Brennan, 2006; Brennan, 2008). The merger of these two fields of inquiry is important for future understandings of what motivates youth to volunteer, as well as factors that inhibit them from becoming involved. Research on youth participation in communities has found that youth gain important protective factors and achieve mastery in social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose, as well as important links to community (Brennan, 2008; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Kegler et al., 2005; Safrit, Gliem, & Gliem, 2004; Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000). This can, in particular, set the stage for clearly identifying youth roles and their long-term participation in volunteerism. Equally important, young people involved as volunteers become empowered to become problem-solvers, decision-makers, and committed leaders in their community in the future (Safrit, 2002). Lastly, through the active interaction of youth and adults in the volunteer process, a more representative voice is provided that reflects the diverse needs and wants of the community and the organizations within it.

The Basis for Active Youth Volunteerism and Community Involvement

Prior research has explored the basis for active youth community involvement. There have been discussions related to youth

as being self-consumed and uninformed and as being isolated from involvement in community development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Consequently, research has explored whether youth are motivated to participate in community service and if so, potential motivational forces behind their participation (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005). Youth have identified a number of motivations related to their volunteerism, such as needing to meet school requirements, hoping to earn higher grades in a class, improving their chances of college admissions, or as being hired in a desired job (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002; Safrit et al., 2004). Other important reasons to volunteer have also emerged including feelings of efficacy (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992; Sherrod et al., 2002), responsibility/leadership (Kubisch, 2005), and needing to be taken seriously (Flanagan & Van Horn, 2001). Community attachment has been found to be a predictor of motivation for youth involvement (Brennan, 2008; Brennan et al., 2007).

Links between practices and processes are also seen as key ingredients of successful community-based youth programs, such as youth feeling that they matter, have a voice in determining programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), contribute to a set of shared values (Sherrod, et al., 2002), and influence others by setting an example (Brennan, Barnett & Baugh, 2007). Lastly, specific sociodemographic variables have been linked to volunteerism and social participation. These include age, gender, socio-economic status, length of residence, income, and rural location (Brennan, 2005; Brennan, Barnett & Lesmeister, 2007; Cox, 2000; Jacob, Bourke, & Luloff, 1997). Household size has also been reported as an important factor in encouraging volunteerism (Independent Sector, 2001). This reflects the role of

interaction among family members and the outside world as fostering opportunities for, and awareness of, volunteer efforts.

Methods

The researchers used a mixed methods approach (i.e., quantitative survey data and qualitative key informant interviews). Initial data collection involved 12 key informant interviews with youth, adults actively involved in youth/adult partnerships, and 4-H program development agents during the summer of 2005. Key informants were identified based on their involvement in volunteerism and youth volunteer programming/management. Additional interviewees were contacted through "snowball sampling," a technique where each key informant was asked to identify other knowledgeable individuals to interview (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Snowball sampling is appropriate when a study is primarily explorative, qualitative and descriptive.

Interviews lasted no more than 90 minutes. Interviewees were assured that all responses would remain confidential and that no ideas or perspectives would be attributed to specific interviewee. Responses were recorded in writing by the interviewer as well as with a tape-recorder when permitted. Responses were assembled and analyzed. Steps in the analysis included compiling all responses to specific questions; identifying key phrases, words, and concepts; and summarizing emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As themes emerged, the information or views obtained were not attributed to specific individuals or groups. Similarly, cross-case and within-case analyses were used to determine social networks, common issues/context, and time order events that shaped youth volunteerism (Miles & Huberman). Data gathered from key informants enlightened and helped design a 4-H participant survey. Finally,

these interview data were useful in interpreting the findings of data drawn from the survey.

Following the key informant interviews, survey data was obtained from a convenience sample of Florida teen 4-H participants through a self-administered questionnaire which utilized the total design method (Dillman, 2000). The questionnaire was based upon the concepts and variables identified in the literature, but also utilized the key informant interviews to address conditions and context unique to youth volunteerism. To assess the face validity of the questionnaire, an expert panel was used to assess the concepts and variables measured. The questionnaire was then pilot tested on a group of 15 4-H participants of varying ages and backgrounds to establish its reliability. A Cronbach's Alpha score of .79 was reported. Feedback from these groups was then incorporated into the final questionnaire.

Data collection took place by randomly selecting four different major 4-H events between June and September 2005. Included were the Florida 4-H Legislature, State 4-H Congress, and two "Learning and Leading" workshops. These events contained a substantial number of diverse statewide participants for the convenience sample. A total of 679 youth ages 12-18 took part in these events. Completed and usable questionnaires were obtained from 418 respondents, representing a response rate of 62%. This response rate and the number of usable questionnaires returned were more than sufficient to statistically represent 4-H Youth in Florida (Isaac & Michael, 1997). Sample validation comparing survey respondents to statewide 4-H enrollment data was conducted. Overall the sample population did not differ substantially from the overall population. Finally, it should be noted that the convenience sample utilized presents a limitation in that the major 4-H events where data were collected may

not have completely represented all 4-H youth. While these events were statewide and distributed at different regions of the state, it is conceivable that select 4-H subpopulations may not have been represented. Included would be lower income, remote rural, and youth involved in specialized programs that may not have warranted their participation in the events from which the convenience sample was drawn.

Based on previous research and theory, several conceptual areas were focused on for multivariate analysis. Youth volunteerism was measured with a multidimensional index that measured frequency and level of participation in voluntary activities. This dependent variable was constructed by summing the following items: the number of clubs, groups, and/or organizations to which the respondent belonged (number of clubs/organizations); hours per month spent on voluntary organized activities (number of hours); a self-ranking description of the respondent's level of involvement in local activities, events, or organizations (1 – not at all active to 4 – very active); membership on a community board (0 - no/1- yes); membership on a community council (0 - no/1- yes); and membership on a community committee (0 - no/1- yes).

The data were factor analyzed using several models/rotations (principal axis factoring and least squares methods with a varimax, quartimax, and direct oblimin rotations). The criteria established in advance of the selection of factor items were: a factor loading of .35 or higher; at least a .10 difference between the item's loading with its factors and each of the other factors; and interpretability (Kim & Mueller, 1978). In all analyses, only one factor was identified which had an eigenvalue greater than 1.0. Additionally, review of the scree test plots indicated that a one factor solution was most appropriate.

Sociodemographic variables were included and represented items such as gender,

age (in years), length of residences (years and months), number of residents in the household, rural/urban location (1 – farm to 6 – large city), and household income level (1- lower income to 3 – higher income). Barriers to community involvement were also seen as being important and were measured individually by the following statements: How do the following affect your decision to become actively involved in your community? Not being taken seriously by adults, Not being asked to participate, No identified role for youth in organizations, Not being assigned to committees, Organizations not allowing youth to vote, Friends disapproving of my involvement, Not having skills to offer, Feeling intimidated by others, Not having transportation to meetings, Not having time to commit, Not being sure of the real benefit of involvement, and Not being recognized for my efforts. Response options ranged from 1 – not a problem to 5 – major problem.

The research literature also indicates a variety of motivations behind youth volunteerism. Variables included were statements such as: I believe that the community needs new ideas, I believe that the community needs better services, I am dissatisfied with the way things are, I enjoy local politics, I believe that others will eventually return the favor for my efforts, The community needs volunteers to reduce costs, I need community service for school/scholarships, and I feel it is my public duty as a citizen. Response options ranged from 1 – no influence to 5 – strong influence. Based upon factor analysis, these items were used as a summative score (Cronbach's Alpha = .68).

In addition to motivations and obstacles, the research literature also suggests that youth volunteerism is greatly shaped by the extent to which it is received positively and encouraged by adults. This receptivity was measured by items such as: I'm actively involved in decision making, I'm actively

involved in policy making, My community values youth in working toward solutions, Youth play a useful role in the community, I am not taken seriously when making decisions, I have a large say in how the organization grows, My input has value, and I influence the community by being in this organization. Response options ranged from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree. Based on factor analysis these items were used as a summative score (Cronbach's Alpha = .84).

Finally, various influencing variables were seen as shaping youth volunteerism. These influencing variables included: How does each of the following influence your decision to become involved in community activities? Monetary reward, Recognition, Opportunity to use my skills, Getting acquainted with people, Opportunity to develop new skills, Being asked by friends, Influencing the behavior of others, To set an example, Being asked by local leaders, and Having transportation provided. For all, response options ranged from 1 – no influence to 5 – strong influence.

Data Analysis

To determine the specific impacts of the above conceptual areas on youth volunteerism, a series of multiple regression models were used to assess the partial effects of each conceptual area as well as the cumulative effect of all independent variables together (Table 1). Focused alone, all conceptual areas played an important role in shaping youth volunteerism. Receptivity and volunteer influences were the strongest predictors of community involvement ($R^2=.23$ and $.16$ respectively). Motivations ($R^2=.14$) and obstacles ($R^2=.10$) played an important role as well. Among the sociodemographic variables that were positive and significantly related were age and household income. Rural/urban location was also significant, with rural youth being more involved. These items accounted for 11% of the variation in the model ($R^2=.11$).

While each conceptual area provided insight into youth volunteer behaviors, these were analyzed individually and did not account for the total effects and interactions of all variables together as would be found in real life. To determine this summative effect, all variables were entered into a full model (Model 6). In this analysis, four variables were statistically significant and the model accounted for 34% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2=.339$). A more parsimonious reduced stepwise model was then developed consisting of systematically eliminating non-significant variables and ultimately identifying only those items which were statistically significant (Reduced Model). This model identified six significant variables and accounted for 35% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2=.35$). Those found to be significant included age, the influence of involvement to set an example to others, the motivations index, the obstacle of youth not being allowed voting privileges (negatively related), the obstacle of a lack of recognition, and the receptivity index.

Findings and Implications

The findings of this study provide insights into the factors most directly shaping youth attitudes and their choice to become involved in volunteer activities, as well as presenting direct implications for applied use. These findings are generally consistent with previous research (Agnew, 1989; Hummon, 1990; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Safrit et al., 2004; Theodori, 2000).

Each of the significant variables identified present specific implications for administrators and managers of volunteer resources. Taken together they present a detailed picture of efforts that can foster effective youth-adult partnerships and better include youth in the community volunteerism process. The significance of the

Table 1
Comparison of Seven Multivariate Models on Youth Volunteerism .

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Reduced Overall
-- Standardized Regression Coefficients --							
Demographic Variables							
Gender (males=1)	-.070					-.001	
Age	.248***					.167**	.217***
Length of residence	.085					.055	
Household size	.054					.035	
Urban/Rural location	-.101*					-.064	
Household income	.134**					.094*	
Barriers							
Not being taken seriously		.093				-.003	
Not being asked to participate		-.014				-.017	
No identified role for youth		-.120				-.074	
No assignment to committees		-.030				.025	
Youth not allowed to vote		-.192**				-.081	-.102*
Friends disapproving		.054				.031	
Not having skills to offer		.064				.018	
Feeling intimidated		.158**				.066	
Not having transportation		.035				-.017	
Not having time to commit		-.100				-.028	
Not being sure of the benefit		.080				.019	
Not being recognized		-.098				-.058	-.125**
Motivations Index			.375***			.154***	.171***
Receptivity Index				.487***		.304***	.329***
Influences							
Receiving a money reward					-.057	.004	
Receiving recognition					-.093	-.076	
Opportunity to use my skills					.119	.084	
To get acquainted					-.006	-.060	
Opportunity for new skills					.074	.047	
Being asked by friends					.043	.038	
To influencing others					.074	.044	
To set an example for others					.227***	.067	.126**
Being asked by local leaders					-.035	-.043	
R ² Adjusted	.106	.097	.139	.235	.156	.339	.353
F value	7.870***	4.366***	65.822***	122.685***	9.043***	7.094***	32.301***
Cases	349	376	403	396	391	344	344

* significant at the .05 level ** significant at the .01 level *** significant at the .001 level

sociodemographic variables can serve as an indicator of which youth are involved in volunteerism and which are not. Investigations into who are active, and why they are, can provide alternate strategies for volunteer administration and a means for encouraging participation from excluded segments of the youth population. The significance of age is important in explaining involvement, with older youth being more likely to volunteer. These would be a target audience for encouraging volunteerism. On the other hand, youth at earlier ages could be approached to volunteer and age appropriate volunteer activities developed if not already existing. By including younger citizens in such activities, they are more likely to make volunteering a lifelong behavior.

Variables reflecting the receptivity of youth volunteerism were included in an index and found to have the largest impact overall on youth volunteerism. Not surprisingly, when adults and community organizations were open to, and supportive of, youth volunteerism, youth were more likely to choose to become active. From a program and policy perspective, administrators and managers of volunteer resources would do well to make it clearly understood to the public that they are receptive to youth becoming part of the volunteer process. This could be accomplished by formal announcements, calls for volunteers, collaborations with youth organizations, and other activities that would showcase how receptive local groups are to youth involvement.

Influences on youth were also found to have a substantial impact. More specifically, regression analysis indicated that being able to set an example for others was a strong predictor of youth volunteerism. To encourage youth volunteerism, administrators and managers of volunteer resources should provide examples of success stories where youth have led by example. They should also create specialized programs

where youth can be the driving force behind organizing and implementing volunteer campaigns.

Motivations to volunteer were also found to be another predictor of volunteerism. Analysis showed a positive relationship between the motivations index and youth volunteerism, indicating that motivations behind youth actions need to be closely considered and incorporated into volunteer administration plans. Building on these findings, administrators and managers of volunteer resources could focus on the motivations that made up the index. For example, steps taken to actively involve youth in decision and policy making, show that youth are taken seriously when making decisions, provide youth with a say in how the organization grows, and valuing participant input would go a long way in encouraging volunteerism. Furthermore, administrators and managers of volunteer resources could more closely link youth contributions to the wider community and stress that they influence the community by being in the organization, that the community values youth in working toward solutions, and that youth play an overall useful role in the community.

Conversely, some barriers were found, which present direct implications for volunteerism. Specifically, two barriers were significant and provide direct opportunities for applied efforts. Youth not being able to vote was negatively related to volunteerism, as was a lack of recognition for youth contributions. Volunteer organizations and administrators may address these two barriers by providing active youth with voting privileges so that they have greater ownership and influence over volunteer activities. If youth are to become long-term players in the volunteer sector, it is important that they feel welcome and their input valued in the decision-making process. Equally important is the need to formally and

informally recognize and acknowledge the contributions of volunteering youth. These recognitions could take a variety of forms from certificates, awards functions, or announcements highlighting the contributions of individuals or groups of youth.

Conclusion

Youth have the potential to serve communities as volunteers, and to be shaped in a positive way through their volunteer involvement. The analysis of variables and conceptual groupings show that youth volunteerism is affected by a variety of conditions. By determining that motivations, influences and receptivity have a significant impact on youth volunteerism, these variables may be promoted to increase youth empowerment and volunteerism.

Conversely, those items identified as barriers that hinder youth volunteerism may be further understood and overcome. Administrators and managers of volunteer resources and youth development professionals can focus more on building volunteer opportunities that allow youth to set an example for others, particularly other youth. This may result in increased youth involvement, leading to positive effects on other domains of youth development (Scales & Leffert, 1999).

From an applied perspective, the information provided by this study can be used to better assess the motivational forces of youth toward volunteering in their communities. By understanding the process of attaining these assets, these characteristics may emerge in relation to the applied behaviors. Finally, this research has added to our body of knowledge regarding the process of recruiting and retaining youth volunteers. Additional information will, however, be needed to more adequately evaluate the factors which explain how and why youth take on these active roles. This

understanding and advancement of theory is critical to the empowerment of youth and the active involvement of future generations of community leaders.

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Dr. Rose Barnett is an educator who specializes in youth development issues, with a M.Ed. in Counselor Education and doctorate in Educational Leadership/Higher Education. Her post-doctorate was in the area of Graduate Studies and Research in Education at the University of Florida. Her experience includes being co-administrator of the Title I Technical Assistance Center for 16 school districts in North Central Florida, serving as Research Coordinator for the Florida Safe Learning Environment Institute, and currently serving as Co-Principal Investigator for the Florida After-School Enrichment Program.

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