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Participation in and Benefits of Volunteering Activities Among University Students

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Abstract

Participation in volunteerism has been shown to produce benefits related to health, work-related experience and sense of social responsibility. This online survey research attempted to determine university students' participation and benefits gained from volunteering activities. Students mainly participated in university volunteering activities related to community development, sports and education. Three categories of benefits are intrinsic gains, career and self enhancement, and extrinsic returns. Having an array of suitable volunteering activities and good institutional networking with external agencies should be the support university provide to students so that they will gain many benefits that enhance personal skills and future employability.

Keywords: University Students, Volunteering Activities, Benefits, Institutional Support.

Introduction

Student volunteering can be defined as students volunteering within the university, student union/association, and student clubs or societies. Volunteering programs are sometimes part of the curriculum, carrying certain weightage of marks for the student grade. Volunteering activities in the university is seen as a venue to engage students in civic behaviors through helping the needy. Although the main objective is to get members to become long-term regular volunteers, often time occasional volunteering work is sufficient in instilling good attitude among helpers. The trend now has switched from regular and long-term to shorter-term, episodic, or occasional volunteering, which is more popular and feasible among young people (Handy, Brodeur, & Cnaan, 2006). People seek out and engage in short-term experiences that will fulfil their immediate and timely needs, and they sometimes move on to other fulfilling experiences. The most important reasons for volunteering were to help someone in the community; to learn new skills; to respond to their needs or skills; and to help gain experience to benefit future career (Holdsworth, 2010).

Studies have shown many benefits of volunteering. Haski-Leventhal, Cnaan, Handy, Brudney, Holmes, Hustinx et. al (2008) research has established a strong relationship between volunteering and health: those who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression later in life than those who do not volunteer. The positive effect of volunteering on physical and mental health is due to the personal sense of accomplishment that an individual can

gain from his or her volunteer activities (Herzog, Franks, Markus, & Holmberg, 1998). Volunteering can also provide a sense of purpose in one's life (Greenfield and Marks, 2004).

For students, Harrington (2016) drew attention to four benefits for volunteering. Majority of students in her study were involved in volunteering work in order to help the community, develop new skills as well as gain work experience, build community awareness, and meet new people. Smith, Holmes, Haski-Levenhal, Cnaan, Handy, & Brudney (2010) highlighted that student volunteers were influenced by a mix of motivations and benefits in five main areas. The first area is in building and maintaining civil society. The second aspect is the belief that volunteering can foster interpersonal trust, toleration and empathy for others, and respect for the common good, thus making students less likely to engage in socially pathological behavior. Student volunteers also are motivated by physical health benefits of social integration and social support because by helping others, they may develop stronger networks that reduce stress and disease risk. In addition, students foresee a gain in terms of mental health benefits as a result of one's subjective interpretation of his or her personal well-being since volunteering adds a social role to one's life. Finally, the fifth area of benefit for is it helps to advances students, career achievement in future.

The benefit of promoting career advancement for students involved in volunteering activities is seconded by other researches. Kelly (2014) found that the main benefit undergraduate students engage in volunteer work is to develop career opportunities and increase employability. Elev (2003) wrote that a major motivator for young people is the opportunity to gain work-related experience, skills, and qualifications that can help them in their education and careers. Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) also pointed out to benefits of volunteering as associated with career choice and employability after graduation. Such assumption may be due to the enhancement of students' academic development, personal skills development, and sense of civic responsibility when involving in volunteering works (Astin & Sax,1998).

The university institution under study has long been engaged in volunteering activities at community and national levels. The staff and students had engaged in short-term, episodic volunteering such as helping flood victims, contributing to poor community members and organizing school activities. In 2016, a total of 33 volunteering programs were recorded, registered and carried out by the staff and/ or students. There is an inclination to believe that volunteering activities has bring about many benefits to the volunteers and the recipients. However, there is a lack of reliable data to support such conclusion. It is indeed imperative that this study be conducted in order to determine the nature and benefits of volunteering programs. Therefore, this study aims at identifying the extent to which university students really participated in volunteering activities and the benefits they have gained from such involvement. Specifically, what are the types of volunteering activities that university students participated in, and what are the benefits they perceived to be gained from such involvement.

Methodology

A survey research was conducted in one public university using questionnaires distributed through online application. A total of 186 responses were analyzed for this report. There are 34 (18.3%) diploma students, 135 (72.6%) undergraduate students and 17 (9.1%) postgraduate students who responded to the survey. From those, 39 (21%) are males and 147 (79%) are females. The ages range from 19 to 34 years old with the average age of 22.24 years old.

The instrument was self-developed by the researchers in order to tailor-made the items specifically to answer the research questions. Besides a section on demographic, the survey involves four sections: types and frequencies of volunteering activities that students have participated in, benefits of volunteerism (Cronbach alpha = 0.87), reasons for not participating (Cronbach alpha = 0.93), and institutional support or volunteerism (Cronbach alpha = 0.91). The high Cronbach alphas for the items indicate that the items have high reliability and thus can be considered as good items. The Likert scales ranged from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

Results

The findings show that from the total respondents, 154 (82.8%) claimed to have been involved in volunteering activities while the other 32 (17.2%) have not. Among those who said yes, 110 (76.4%) participated in volunteering activities organized by the university while the other 29 (20%) joined non-institutional activities. Majority of them got involved at least once in a semester (27.8%) or 2-3 times each semester (24.7%). The third large group said they joined only once a year (19.4%). All these responses indicate that majority of the students involved in episodic or occasional volunteering. Only about 15.3% got involved in regular and long-term volunteering ranging from once a week to 2-3 times a month.

Table 1: Types of Volunteering Activities

| Volunteering activities | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Community Development | 91 | 48.9 |
| Sports | 69 | 37.1 |
| Education | 51 | 27.4 |
| Crisis & Disaster Management | 43 | 23.1 |
| Religious | 34 | 18.3 |
| Health | 28 | 15.1 |
| Cultural | 22 | 11.8 |
| ICT & Social Entrepreneurship | 20 | 10.8 |
| Festivals | 17 | 9.1 |

Table 1 shows the types of volunteering activities students participated in. Three main types of volunteering activities students involved in are community development (48.9%), sport-related activities (37.1%), and education-related activities (27.4%). This is followed by other types of activities such as crisis and disaster management (23.1%), religious-related activities (18.3%), health-related activities (15.1%), cultural-related activities (11.8%), ICT and social entrepreneurship-related activities (10.8%), and festivals (9.1%).

Table 2: Benefits of Volunteering

| Benefits | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| intrinsic gains | 4.58 | 0.15 |
| career and self enhancement | 4.51 | 0.40 |
| extrinsic returns | 3.95 | 0.55 |

Students were asked to indicate the importance of the benefits that they gained when joining volunteering activities. Table 2 lists the three categories of benefits. The most important benefits are intrinsic gains (mean = 4.58, s.d. = 0.15), followed by career and self enhancement (mean = 4.51, s.d.

= 0.40), and extrinsic returns (mean = 3.95, s.d. = 0.55). The first category of benefits namely intrinsic gains refers to pleasurable and enjoyable benefits that students get when participating in volunteerism such as contributing to society, helping people in need, doing something useful, and help an event become successful. The interest in doing volunteering work itself without looking for any external rewards are proven by their high ratings for wanting to help, interested in the activity conducted, liking volunteerism work, and feeling proud to be able to work for society. The second category of benefits is about career and self enhancement where students rated as highly important benefits of items on building self-confidence, chance to use existing skill, using new skills, and improving soft skills. The other benefits include working with others, getting training, developing career, and improving opportunity to get employment. The third category of benefits are a mixture of external gains that students can get from participating in volunteering activities such as getting new experiences, filling free time, becoming part of an important event, meeting new friends, getting involved in activities are related to self/family/friends, and getting reward (such as free ticket, gift). Least important benefits that some students chose for involving in volunteering work include it being different from daily routine, feeling that nobody else will do it, and following somebody's invitation.

For those who admitted to not having participated in any volunteering activities so far, their reasons include not being invited, not knowing about volunteering activities, no time due to study commitments, and feeling that volunteering would involve lots of time. Respondents were also asked to rate the extent they feel institutional supports have influenced them to participate or not in volunteering activities. The highest rated supports were availability of suitable volunteering activities, facilities, activities organized, and institutional networking with outside organizations or societies. This is followed by financial support, encouragement from departmental heads or lecturers, and training.

Conclusion

It is encouraging that this study found a large percentage of respondents who had been involved in volunteering activities even if it is only at university level as an episodic or occasional volunteer. Majority of the students participated in volunteering activities organized by the university while only a small percentage had joined non-institutional activities. The initial exposure and experience that first timers get when they joined a volunteering activity in order to fulfil a course requirement will hopefully ignite the goodwill and altruistic nature in the students. It is important that students are nurtured to care about their community and feel a sense of responsibility towards the society through volunteerism. Volunteerism can help change the mind-sets and attitudes of students because it engages the minds and hearts. Through volunteerism, students can improve their well-being, learning experiences and employability (Public the university should continue to increase the support and practicalities of the volunteer experience offered to the students. Be it as part of a course syllabus or assignment, or non-academic event at university level, various opportunities of volunteering activities will attract students to take part since it is easier in terms of organization and logistics management. In addition, participation in such activities will certainly be an added value to the development of students personal, soft and technical skills. Learning about volunteering practices, management and organization will contribute to self-development and enhance employability (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, n.d.).

The survey results indicate that majority of university students in this study involved in volunteering activities assigned as part of their coursework or co-curricular activity. This is further

emphasized when students said that they perceived the institutional support in terms of having suitable volunteering activities organized with appropriate facilities provided. Although this seems not so to reflect high volunteering spirit, at least it is a good start for undergraduate students specially to get initiated and oriented to the world of volunteerism. The financial and curriculum structure that make it compulsory for students to engage in at least one volunteering work in a semester will hopefully expose students and further encourage them to continue participating in volunteerism after university.

The results reveal that the students who participated in volunteering work do so because they see volunteering as satisfying their intrinsic motives. Students want to contribute something to society and helping needy people or at events. It is not wrong that students also see the benefits they get in developing their personal skills to prepare for a better self when seeking future employment. A study on the health benefits of student volunteering find strong evidence that volunteering can contribute to students' mental health (Lederer, Autry, Day & Oswalt, 2015).

As indicated by the research finding, university should expand its social networking and work closely with outside organizations in order to better provide volunteering opportunities to students. A strong institutional support is imperative to encourage university students to be involved in volunteering activities, thus enabling them to gain many benefits in terms of civic responsibilities, new experiences and soft skills that will contribute to the development of socially responsible future generations.

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