First-Year Students’ Plans to Volunteer: An Examination of the Predictors of Community Service Participation

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Context
- Education for responsible citizenship has long been a part of the mission of higher education
- Institutions have become more purposeful in promoting community service among college students
- Yet 36% of seniors never participate in community service during college (NSSE, 2005)

Benefits of Community Service
- Scholastic
  - Better grades
  - Greater academic gains
  - More time on academic tasks
  - Increased critical thinking
- Vocational
  - More service orientated careers
  - Higher degree aspirations
- Personal
  - Leadership skills
  - Social self-confidence
  - Commitment to racial understanding
  - Development of a sense of self
  - Social responsibility
  - Alumni giving and participation

Previous Research
- Predictors of involvement in community service are not well understood
- Only a few studies have examined which students volunteer during college
- Students are more likely to volunteer if they:
  - Are female
  - Are more religious
  - Are less materialistic
  - Have a prior commitment to community service
  - Have higher college grades
  - Have higher degree aspirations
- Students are more likely to volunteer if they:
  - Live on as opposed to off campus
  - Are members of a student organization
  - Are unemployed or work fewer hours per week
  - Are encouraged to volunteer in high school
- Students are less likely to volunteer if they:
  - Are required to volunteer in high school
- No differences in volunteerism by race/ethnicity

Limitations of Research
- Sampling
  - Convenience – Generalizability problem
  - Nesting – Unit of analysis problem
- Analysis
  - Chi-Square tests – no statistical controls
  - OLS regression for dichotomous dependent variables
  - Fail to examine differences in community service participation by institutional characteristics
  - Volunteering treated as dichotomous. Fail to examine:
    - Differences in the extent to which students volunteer
    - Intentions of students who do not volunteer
Study Purpose

- Students may not necessarily be a single entity with regard to their intentions to volunteer while in college
- Better information is thus needed about the interactions between:
  - students’ intentions to volunteer
  - students’ background characteristics
  - characteristics of the institutions they attend
- This information can assist in removing barriers and in maximizing the number of students who volunteer in college

Research Questions

- How do students’ plans to volunteer differ:
  - By their background characteristics and college experiences?
  - By the characteristics of the institution that they attend?

Data Source & Sample

- National Survey of Student Engagement
- Assesses the extent to which college students:
  - Engage in empirically-vetted good educational practices
  - Perceive that their institution emphasizes these practices
  - Perceive that they have developed as a result of their college experiences
- Data from 2004 and 2005 administrations
- Sample
  - 623 baccalaureate degree-granting institutions in the U.S
  - 129,597 randomly sampled first-year students

Variables

- Independent Variables
  - Student background characteristics
    - Nontraditional age
    - Gender
    - Race
    - Parents’ education
    - ACT scores
  - Student college experiences
    - Enrollment status
    - On- or off-campus residence
    - Learning community
    - Athlete
    - Fraternity or Sorority member
    - Hours per week work on- and off-campus
- Independent Variables (cont.)
  - Institution characteristics
    - Sector
    - Size
    - Urbanicity
**Analysis**

Hierarchical Multinomial Logit Model
- Non-redundant contrasts – constrained estimates for 'Plan to do' to equal zero
- Changes the interpretation of odds ratios – now relative to 'Plan to do' category
- Examples:
  - Females have greater odds than males of volunteering (versus planning to volunteer)
  - Females have lower odds than males of being undecided about volunteering (versus planning to volunteer)
  - Females have lower odds than males of not planning to volunteer (versus planning to volunteer)

Findings

Part 1: Model Specification
- All tests were statistically significant
- Sufficient differences among categories
- Provides support for estimating unrestricted model

Part 2: Null Model
- Estimated percentages
  - 41% volunteered
  - 40% planned to volunteer
  - 13% had not decided
  - 5% did not plan to volunteer
- Between-institution variance
  - 95% plausible value interval for volunteered 19% - 67%

Findings

Part 3: College Experiences
- Residence
  - On-campus residents had:
    - Same relative odds of volunteering
    - Lower odds of being undecided about volunteering and of not planning to volunteer
- Learning Community
  - Members had:
    - Greater odds of volunteering (by 152%)
    - Lower odds of being undecided about volunteering and of not planning to volunteer

**Analysis**

Part 1: Model Specification
- Are four outcome categories necessary?
- Are any outcome categories indistinguishable?
- Estimated three binomial logit models
  - Done vs. Plan to do
  - Plan to do vs. Have not decided
  - Have not decided vs. Do not plan to do

Part 2: Null Model (i.e., intercept only)
- Percentage of students in each category of outcome
  - Between-institution variance in each category

Part 3: Full Model
- Examine differences in volunteering by student and institution characteristics

Findings

Part 3: Background characteristics
- Entering Educational Capital:
  - Students whose parents had higher levels of education had greater odds of volunteering
  - Students who entered college with higher ACT scores had greater odds of volunteering
  - No differences by parents' education or ACT scores in students' intentions to volunteer

Part 3: College Experiences
- Greek Membership
  - Members had:
    - Greater odds of volunteering (123% greater)
    - Lower odds of being undecided about volunteering and of not planning to volunteer
  - Major/Discipline
    - Relative to students in Arts and Humanities:
      - Students in Education, Social Sciences, and Business had greater odds of volunteering
      - Students in the Biological Sciences, Engineering, Physical Sciences, and Professional Occupations had same relative odds of volunteering
      - Undecided majors had lower odds of volunteering and higher odds of being undecided about volunteering
Findings

Part 3: Institutional Characteristics

- Size
  - Students at larger institutions had:
    - Lower odds of volunteering
    - Greater odds of being undecided about volunteering and of planning not to volunteer

- Urbanicity
  - Relative to students at institutions in large cities:
    - Students at institutions in mid-size cities or large towns had greater odds of volunteering
    - Students at institutions in mid-size cities or large towns had lower odds of being undecided about volunteering or of not planning to volunteer

Implications

- Entering Educational Capital
  - Students with more capital may be better able to manage their academic load
  - Students with more capital may have exclusive access to experiences that encourage volunteerism
  - Recommend incorporating service into programs for students who are less academically inclined

- Residence
  - Recommend encouraging on-campus living for first year students
  - Recommend increasing opportunities for students to become members of learning communities
  - These experiences have benefits that extend well beyond community service participation

- Greek Life
  - Students in Greek life perceive a strong organizational commitment to community service and receive a consistent message and outlets for volunteering – this can happen at institutional level
  - Recommend fostering student organizations that join the spirit of community service with peer involvement

- College Major
  - Findings suggest several broad disciplines where service-learning could be better incorporated to increase volunteerism
  - Recognize challenges in making service-learning a meaningful and seamless part of the curriculum
  - Recommend linking campus career services with local business community service initiatives for undeclared majors

- Institution Size
  - Larger institutions may have more difficulty creating and maintaining an environment that espouses a commitment to community service
  - Suggest relying more on smaller campus communities and student organizations

- Institution Urbanicity
  - Disappointing, given the numerous opportunities to connect with community through service
  - Need to find ways to overcome difficulty in forming community partnerships due to issues of race or culture, differences in rhetoric and leadership style, and lack of resources

Implications

- Final Thought
  - Students are not a single entity with regard to community service participation or intentions to volunteer during college
  - Using model coefficients:
    - Simulate community service participation/intentions for your entering first-year students
    - Realign programs and resources, and tailor specific initiatives toward maximizing number of community service participants

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