Volunteerism and its Effect on Emotional Well-Being in College Students

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Introduction

It is generally agreed upon that "volunteer" is a difficult term to define. Motivation, formality, hours logged, reimbursement, and type of volunteerism are all factors that need to be considered. Some definitions focus on the absence of financial compensation (Tuthill, 1982), while others strictly adhere to the idea that altruism must be the central motive (Bussell & Forbes, 2001). For the purpose of this study, a volunteer will be defined as a person who is "giving time and talent to deliver services or perform tasks with no direct financial compensation expected" (Tuthill, 1982).

Within our culture, volunteerism is widely considered a selfless act, and volunteer hours are required for membership for multiple organizations, Greek societies, and for eligibility for certain scholarships. But do we gain any emotional benefits from giving our time to others? This study looks at the potential emotional benefits that college students experience while volunteering. If there are any benefits to emotional well-being to be gained by volunteering, college students need to be made aware of it; according to the 2015 American College Health Association assessment survey, almost one in six college students had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, while over 17% of students were diagnosed with depression (Eisenberg, Hunt, &Speer, 2013). If volunteering provides a way to decrease rates of anxiety and depression among college students and improve the positive affect of this population, then relevant research needs to be done so volunteerism becomes a mental health resource on college campuses.

Literature Review

According to literature, there are some common patterns seen in the demographics of volunteers. In most cases, the majority of volunteers will be female, and volunteers over the age of 50 are more likely to participate (Wymer, 1998). Volunteers are more likely to have a higher socioeconomic status and be working part-time versus full-time jobs (Smith, 1999). Family background also plays a part, as young people are more likely to volunteer if they have participated in past volunteer events with their parents (Shure, 1998).

In available research, it seems that the majority of studies focus on the youth and geriatric population. Senior citizens seem to especially benefit from participating in volunteer events, most likely due to the social connectedness it provides (Creaven, Healy, & Howard, 2018). Other studies have found that volunteer opportunities can give seniors a sense of purpose and can help them transition into a stage of life where they have different roles; it can also facilitate regular social interactions and provide coping mechanisms for loss or personal crises (Li & Ferraro, 2005).

Benefits of Volunteering

By this study's definition, there is no financial compensation for volunteering, but research has shown that volunteers experience multiple physical and emotional benefits from participating in a volunteer event, including increased self-efficacy and self-esteem (Brown, Hoye, & Nicholson, 2010), decreased rates of anxiety and depression, and increased physical activity (Creaven, Healy, & Howard, 2018).

Social connectedness and the positive health benefits it provides is a common theme in current publications. A survey conducted in Australia shows that volunteers had a higher degree of social connectedness than non-volunteers, and concluded that social connectedness, self-

efficacy, and self-esteem are all mediators between volunteering and positive well-being (Brown, Hoye, & Nicholson, 2010). Other research expands on this, stating that social connectedness, outside of volunteerism, would provide the same benefits to general well-being. However, there are disparities between the hypothesis that the primary reason for volunteering is to create social connectedness and results of an earlier study where altruistic tendencies were found to be the primary reason for volunteering (Bussell & Forbes, 2002).

Some of the benefits from volunteering include lower mortality rate and greater life satisfaction; however, some research also suggests that adults over 60 are more likely to experience these results than younger volunteers ("Health benefits of volunteering," 2007). This potentially means that the research gap regarding age has provided no data on this, or that age and motivation are more influential factors than initially anticipated. Regardless of age, the need to understand the specific mental health benefits that volunteerism provides remains the same.

College Students and Volunteerism

College students have not been studied to the extent of the geriatric population, although doing so could help researchers understand the role that social connectedness, as a facet of volunteerism, plays across multiple age groups and what physical and emotional benefits are gained when this population volunteers. In older adults, volunteer contributions have been found to lower psychological distress, decrease depression and anxiety rates, increase physical health, lower mortality rates, and increase self-respect (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). This correlation, paired with the pervasiveness of mental health disorders on college campuses, provides a unique point of view to study the effect of formal volunteerism on the emotional well-being in college students.

This research will help fill the age gap in data and could provide additional methods and resources to utilize on college campuses. If formal volunteerism provides the same positive effects to younger adults as it does to the older population, it could be a tool to help increase positive affect and decrease the prevalence of anxiety and depressive disorders within the college population.

Method

To answer the question, "Does volunteering have an effect on college students' emotional well-being?", quantitative data needed to be gathered on students' emotional state before and after they volunteered at an event. Finding a positive correlation between volunteerism and emotional health could benefit non-profits who depend on volunteers and could be used as a resource on college campuses to increase the emotional health of students.

Participants

Participants in this study were college students engaged in a volunteering experience. The questionnaire gathered information on students' emotional state immediately before and directly after their volunteer experience. 41 participants successfully completed both the pre-test and the post-test at their respective volunteer event. Data was collected from three events: Boo! At the Zoo, the Buddy Walk, and Advocates for Autism's tabling campaign. The survey conducted was a 28-question pre-test (Appendix A) and a 22-question post-test (Appendix B). Participants were eligible to complete the surveys if they were currently attending college and were volunteers at the event.

Instrumentation

The Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) is a 20-item, self-reporting Likert scale questionnaire that measures both positive and negative affect. Developed as a simple, concise measurement of the two main divisions of mood, the PANAS has a high validity and consistency, is adaptable to both short-term and long-term comparisons, and has been proven to measure these two components of affect accurately and efficiently (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

To score each participant's surveys, the numbers that a participant assigned to the ten positive affect items and negative affect items are added up. Since the PANAS uses a five-point Likert scale, the highest positive and negative affect score a participant can have is 50, and the lowest is ten. My hypothesis was that the negative affect scores will be lower on the PANAS post-test, and the positive affect scores will be higher on the post-test. This pattern could indicate the influence of volunteerism on the emotional health of college students.

Data Collection

To obtain this data, the pre-test and post-test were administered at three different volunteer events. The events served different populations and had different purposes, so each event required slightly different preparation and administration. Boo! At the Zoo was the largest volunteer event and resulted in 33 study participants. The second event was the Buddy Walk, an annual event hosted at World's Fair Park to advocate and show support for people who have Down Syndrome. A low number of college student volunteers resulted in three research participants. The third and final volunteer event was a tabling campaign by a student organization the University of Tennessee's campus, Advocates for Autism. The campaign was Spread the Word to End the Word, which encourages students to sign a pledge to stop using the

R word. At this event, five Advocates for Autism members completed both surveys before and after they volunteered their time tabling.

Results

The goal of this research was to answer three specific research questions: First, does volunteerism increase positive affect in college students after they have volunteered? Secondly, does volunteerism decrease negative affect in college students after they have volunteered? Finally, do volunteers' passion for the volunteer event affect whether they experience emotional benefits?

To answer these questions, we ran descriptive statistics on the data to find the average and standard deviation of pre-test and post-test positive and negative affect. The results of that, found in Table 1, show that the average positive affect score did not increase from pre-test to post-test. However, the average negative affect score did significantly decrease, by a score of over three. This could show that while volunteering does not have an effect on positive affect, it does seem to decrease negative emotions. If this is true, it is consistent with research that found that volunteering caused a slower increase in depressive symptoms in adults over the age of 40 (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005). Without analyzing any other date, it appears that volunteerism has a more profound effect on negative affect than positive affect.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Student Mental Health	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Positive Affect Time 1	41	32.90	7.00
Positive Affect Time 2	41	32.61	10.33
Negative Affect Time 1	41	16.97	6.33
Negative Affect Time 2	41	13.27	5.55

On the pre-test that participants completed, there was a question that asked what the participant's passion level was regarding the event. This was included so correlations could be analyzed that include participants' emotional connection with the event and potential changes in positive and negative affect. Similarly, a Likert scale question was included on the post-test that asked participants to rate their overall experience at the volunteer event. The correlation between positive affect, negative affect, passion level, and overall experience are included on Table 2. The analysis shows that volunteers' overall experience has a positive, significant correlation with post-test positive affect and passion level. It also negatively correlates with pre-test and post-test negative affect. This data shows that on average, the higher a participant rated their post-test positive affect, the more likely they were to rate their overall experience higher.

Table 2: Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Positive Affect Time 1	-					
Positive Affect Time 2	.451**	-				
Negative Affect Time 1	-.068	-.113	-			
Negative Affect Time 2	.135	-.232	.464**	-		
Overall Experience	.094	.610**	-.467	-.457	-	
Passion Level	.268	.320*	-.235	-.027	.403*	-

Conclusion

It does not appear that volunteerism increases positive affect among participants. However, it does seem that volunteerism is correlated with a decrease in negative affect, which could be beneficial for physical health. Decreasing negative affect also decreases the physiological stress that is caused by negative emotions which, left unchecked, could potentially increase stress on the cardiovascular system and result in health issues (Frederickson & Levenson, 1998). The data also shows a positive correlation with the post-test positive affect,

overall volunteer experience, and level of passion felt regarding the event. Therefore, a volunteer who feels more strongly about volunteering for an organization or cause has a better chance of leaving the volunteer event with an increased positive affect and a higher-rated overall experience.

Discussion

This research has limitations regarding its sample size and scope of events surveyed, but it does appear that the effect of volunteerism on college students needs to be studied more in the future. Through the data analysis it can be concluded that volunteerism, especially when a volunteer is serving a cause they are passionate about, will most likely not have a negative effect on emotional well-being. If the results of this study hold true, it may consistently have a positive effect on volunteers' negative affect.

Moving forward, it is important for organizations that utilize volunteers to reach out to the groups, clubs, and student organizations that will share an interest in the organization's cause. Similarly, student groups, honors societies, and college programs that require volunteer hours should attempt to offer resources to connect their students to potential volunteer opportunities. Volunteers who are more passionate about the cause they are serving are the ones who are most likely to experience the benefits of volunteering. If more college students spend their time volunteering at a cause they care about, we may see an impact on anxiety and depression rates on college campuses. Regardless, time spent volunteering is time well spent – with benefits for the organization and the volunteer.

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Appendix A

Survey Pre-Test

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule
(PANAS; Watson et al., 1988)

This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then list the number from the scale below next to each word. Indicate to what extent you feel this way right now. Please complete the unique identifier questions and demographic questions after the PANAS questionnaire.

1	2	3	4	5
Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely

1. Interested_____
2. Distressed _____
3. Excited _____
4. Upset _____
5. Strong _____
6. Guilty _____
7. Scared _____
8. Hostile _____
9. Enthusiastic _____
10. Proud _____
11. Irritable _____
12. Alert _____
13. Ashamed _____
14. Inspired _____
15. Nervous _____
16. Determined _____
17. Attentive _____
18. Jittery _____
19. Active _____
20. Afraid _____

Unique Identifiers (these will be used to compare your pre and post survey answers)

- What are the last two digits of your phone number? _____
- What is the first letter of your favorite color? _____
- What is the first letter of your favorite food? _____

Gender

□ Male
□ Female
□ Prefer not to answer

Age _____

Race

□ White
□ Black or African-American
□ American Indian or Alaskan Native
□ Asian
□ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
□ From multiple races
□ Other (please specify) _____

Class Rank

□ Freshman
□ Sophomore
□ Junior
□ Senior
□ Graduate Student

Major: _____

Reason for volunteering:

_____

_____

How passionate are you about this volunteer event?

- □ Very slightly or not at all
- □ A little
- □ Moderately
- □ Quite a bit
- □ Extremely

Appendix B

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule
(PANAS; Watson et al., 1988)

This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then list the number from the scale below next to each word. Indicate to what extent you feel this way **right now**. Please complete the unique identifier questions and demographic questions after the PANAS questionnaire.

1	2	3	4	5
Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely

1. Interested _____
2. Distressed _____
3. Excited _____
4. Upset _____
5. Strong _____
6. Guilty _____
7. Scared _____
8. Hostile _____
9. Enthusiastic _____
10. Proud _____
11. Irritable _____
12. Alert _____
13. Ashamed _____
14. Inspired _____
15. Nervous _____
16. Determined _____
17. Attentive _____
18. Jittery _____
19. Active _____
20. Afraid __

How would you rate your overall volunteer experience? Please circle one.

1	2	3	4	5
Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied

Unique Identifiers (these will be used to compare your pre and post survey answers)

- What are the last two digits of your phone number? _____
- What is the first letter of your favorite color? _____
- What is the first letter of your favorite food? _____