Promoting students' psychological well-being through volunteering: What works and why?

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Introduction

- Young adult volunteers are vital to the current and future operations of non-profit organizations, and yet students are a particularly under-utilized and under-researched segment of potential volunteers within this age-group (Francis, 2011).

- Data from the UK’s National Union of Students (Ellison and Kerr, 2014) estimated that 725,000 British students (nearly a third of the student population) engage in some volunteering annually with an average of 44 hours participation per year. Of that sample, 78% said that they give their time because of a desire to improve things or help people and 66% aim to develop skills for work. Many reported that feeling part of a community was highly important to them.

- Volunteering has been shown to have positive effects on both the health and well-being of volunteers, with some research demonstrating that people who volunteer at least 100 hours annually report the greatest benefits (Luoh et al., 2002; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003), and appear to ‘flourish’ both within and beyond the volunteering role (cf. Seligman, 2011).

- Employing qualitative methods to explore this under-researched field will enhance and deepen our current knowledge (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010) and suggest applications of volunteer training and support within Universities and other organisations who are seeking to improve and promote positive student and staff experiences.

Method

- Participants: Forty-five student volunteers were recruited for this study. They were either undergraduate or postgraduate students studying at one of six British universities.

- Interviews: The semi-structured interview schedule consisted of 21 open-ended questions.

- Analytic Strategy: Transcripts were analysed by all members of the team using grounded theory.

- Ethical considerations: Full ethical approval was granted from De Montfort University and the principles of the British Psychological Society code of human research ethics (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010) were followed in full throughout the study.

Results & Discussion

- Five of the most prevalent themes are presented diagrammatically below— their temporal nature informed the development of a normative model which we argue captures key elements and processes in sustaining student volunteering.

- In the first phase ‘getting involved’ we explore the motives given by the participants for undertaking volunteering and the catalysts that led them towards certain sorts of volunteering.

- In the second phase ‘maintaining commitment’ we offer three themes which represent some of the ‘active ingredients’ in sustained volunteering participation. These include making connections, developing resilience and keeping the balance.

- In the final phase ‘reaping the rewards’ we focus on two themes – the ways in which participants report a holistic sense of enhanced well-being and self-transformation and the ways in which they felt that volunteering added to their employability.

Recommendations

- Volunteering appears to facilitate development of all five key elements described by the PERMA “model” (Seligman, 2011), which are essential to promoting a sense of well-being, and allowing individuals to flourish. These are: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments.

- Universities that utilise and instil the importance of volunteering and community engagement will be investing in the well-being of students and our future workforce.

- Volunteer managers should look to develop effective systems, with particular emphasis on training, mentoring and supervision, to ensure the on-going support of student volunteers.

Key References

