

UNDERSTANDING PATTERNS OF VOLUNTEERING COMMITMENT AMONGST THIRD LEVEL STUDENTS

Edel Randles & Ellen Scalli, Institute of Technology, Tralee, Ireland

Context

It is well documented that “voluntary activity forms the very core of all vibrant and inclusive societies” (ISC, 2000). It is often referred to as the ‘glue’ that holds society together, and in Ireland sports volunteering represents the strongest of glues. Sports organisations at all levels rely significantly on volunteers. However, attracting, training and retaining these volunteers provides an increasing challenge for sports organisations as society develops, attitudes change, and there appears a shift in levels of civic engagement, particularly amongst young people.

This research sought to establish the following of 3rd level students: Do students volunteer, or not? If so, with what organisations? Why do they initially get involved? Why do they stay involved? Does course of study influence volunteering rates? Does gender impact on volunteering rates? Why do students not engage in volunteering? What can be done to entice students into volunteering positions? What can be done to retain student volunteers?

Methods

Data were collected from questionnaires (n= 180) distributed across 3 schools of study (Business, Science, Engineering), on one weekday during the second semester of the academic term at Tralee. The population was limited to 2nd year students only, as it was felt that they were settled into college life, knew their surroundings, were aware of volunteering opportunities available, were not yet in the more pressurised stages of their academic studies, and as a result had the highest probability of being involved in volunteering. There was a 100% response rate to the questionnaire. The age of the cohort ranged from 18 to 23 years, and comprised 46% (n= 83) women, and 54% (n=97) men.

Results

It was established that of the 180 students surveyed, 25% (n=46) were engaged in volunteering, 66% (118) did not volunteer, and 9% (n=16) had previously volunteered but given up. A one-way ANOVA was carried out to establish whether there was any significant difference between the 3 schools of study, finding that there was a significant variance between the three schools, $f(2,179) = 6.703$, $p < 0.002$. The School of Science had significantly more students involved in volunteering than the Schools of Engineering and Business. 59% of volunteers were involved in sports clubs, and 13% in youth clubs. The School of Science included a course in Health & Leisure Studies, and the sport and leisure interests of these particular students may account for the inter-school variance. There was no significant difference found between gender and rates of volunteering,

Students were asked to select all of the reasons pertinent to their involvement in volunteering, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students reasons for volunteering

<i>Reasons for Involvement</i>	<i>%</i>
Wanted to help	43
Knew people involved	37
Was asked to help	30
Enjoyment	28
Belief in the cause	24
Social Aspects	22
Spare time	15
Good for cv/career	7

The perceived benefits of volunteering were as set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceptions of benefits from volunteering

<i>Benefits of Volunteering</i>	<i>%</i>
Meeting new people	72
Enjoyment	61
Doing good to help others	26
Career enhancement	15
Gaining experience	11
Gaining skills	11
Giving something back	11
Being appreciated	4

Discussion

National data regarding volunteering in Ireland amongst the 18-29 age group, highlighted that women were more likely than men to be involved - 39.4%, compared to 22.1% of men (Ruddle & Mulvihill, 1999). However, this study found that 35% of the male students and 20% of female students were involved in volunteering. The most popular areas of involvement were sports clubs and youth clubs, concurring with the findings of Hustinx et. al. (2005).

When asked what could be done to help retain volunteers, it was highlighted that ‘training’ was viewed as an important factor. ‘Making jobs manageable’ and ‘distributing work evenly (concurring with the findings of Cuskelly, 2004) were also outlined to better volunteer retention. Some organisations are particularly labour-intensive, and the tendency to overburden willing volunteers often abounds, eventually leading to disenchantment. The capacity of these same organisations may be improved if their entrenched organisational practices are challenged, particularly when they are labour-intensive (James et al. 2003).

Of those students who did not engage in volunteering, the main reason cited was ‘lack of time’, though 28.2% also cited ‘had never thought of it’. A significant number of non-volunteers (69%) stated that they would volunteer if more information and training was available, while 54% of this group also believed that volunteers do not get appropriate appreciation for the work that they do.

References

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Contact: edel.randles@staff.itralee.ie