Volunteering with the Elderly: Job Expectations Of College Students

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education support students’ preparation for careers through volunteer service learning experiences. The benefits of volunteer work for college students is well documented, but a limited numbers of studies have examined the consequences of college student volunteer work in the field of aging. The need for gerontological professionals will continue to rise as the rapid growth of the aging population continues. Although colleges and universities offer gerontology or related majors, many students do not consider working with older adults or studying the psychosocial changes that come with age. The current study investigated whether volunteering in the field of aging affected students’ job-related feelings and desire to work with older adults upon graduation. A convenience sample of college students at a large university in a southern city was utilized. The study included 30 participants who volunteered to work with older adults one hour a day for a total of 30 hours. The results revealed that volunteering with older adults positively influenced students’ desire to be employed in gerontological jobs upon graduation but the results were not statistically significant. However, a statistical significance was found with volunteer work positively influencing college students’ job-related feelings toward working with older adults. Therefore, collegiate programmers need to consider how to incorporate experiential activities that include working with elderly populations if students are to alter presupposed opinions regarding gerontological occupations.
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Introduction

The population of older adults is expected to continue to increase rapidly over the next few decades. In 2013, nearly one in seven Americans was aged 65 or older. The aging population of the United States (U.S.) grew from 35.9 million in 2003 to 44.7 million in 2013, and predictions report continued growth to 56.4 million by 2040 and 98.2 million by 2060 (Administration on Aging, 2014). In addition, older adults aged 65 years or older represented 14.1% of the U.S. population in 2013, but the percentage is projected to increase to 21.7% by 2040 (Administration of Aging, 2014). Not only are the numbers of older adults in the U.S. population rising, the length of years that a person lives is also increasing. The average life expectancy of an individual at age 65 has risen to 20.5 years for females and 17.9 years for males (Administration of Aging, 2014). Centenarians, persons age 100 years or older, represented 2.2 per every 10,000 people in the United States in 2015, but estimates are that by 2050 this number will rise to 9.7 per every 10,000 (Pew Research, 2016). These demographic changes create challenges and opportunities for our society.

As the growth of the aging population continues, the need for gerontological professionals will increase. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), the demand for people to fill gerontological jobs increased by 45% in 2015. In addition, 60,000 to 70,000 gerontological employees are projected to be needed by 2020, and the number of workers needed in long-term care facilities will grow from 36,000 in 2002 to 109,000 by 2050 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004).

Gerontological jobs are typically filled by undergraduates and graduate students majoring in professional fields such as social work, leisure studies, nutrition science, and psychology that
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provide minors in gerontology (Bass & Ferraro, 2000; Borod, 2005). A study by Lennon (2000) indicated that of master students pursuing a degree in social work, 19% were enrolled in studies concentrating on children and youth in areas such as child welfare, school social work, or family service; only 2.7% had an aging concentration. Students’ lack of interest (Kropf, 2003), perception of the requirement of high skill levels needed to succeed (Scharlach et al., 2000), and negative attitudes toward older adults (Curl, Simons, & Larkin, 2005; Scharlach et al., 2000) also limited their choice of area to study. Additionally, many students refused to consider working with older adults and studying gerontology as a major because they perceived the work as unchallenging and low paying (Cummings, Adler, & DeCoster, 2005; Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman, 2000).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), over 2.9 million students graduated with associates or bachelor’s degrees as part of the class of 2015. Many of these students struggle to connect what they have learned in college to the demands of their chosen careers. Research by Botelho and Pinto (2004) revealed that senior college students perceived lower returns of a college education than did freshmen. Additionally, senior students reported having more concerns related to securing realistic information about the labor market. Every institution of higher education has their own office of career services to assist students in preparing to launch their careers following graduation. They offer support services such as workshops on resume preparation, dressing for success, interview tips, and salary negotiation. Even with their help, college students may have difficulties when they start looking for their first job after graduation. Twenty-seven percent of college graduates in 2008 indicated their undergraduate major was not related to their current jobs (Staklis & Skomsvold, 2014). Although
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students have an idea of their ideal job and a plan for the future, real work settings and skill requirements are often different from what they imagined or experienced during college.

Leaders in higher education have witnessed the struggles and have begun to push for the inclusion of service learning opportunities such as part time employment, internships, community service, and volunteering as part of the college experience (Cruce & Moore, 2007; Gage & Thapa, 2012; Okun, & Sloane, 2002). Colleges actively encourage students to volunteer in the community, and some require completion of community volunteerism or service learning as a part of a program curriculum (Beehr, LeGro, Porter, Bowling, & Swader, 2010).

The benefits of volunteer work for college students have been widely reported as increased grade point average (GPA), assistance with preparation for exams, and increasing the number of contacts with faculty (Astin & Sax, 1998). College students who have experienced volunteer work were more likely to participate in service-oriented professions (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999) and to have aspirations for advanced degrees (Astin & Sax, 1998). In addition, volunteer work has been associated with social benefits such as enhanced leadership skills, sense of self, commitment to social issues and self-confidence (Astin & Sax, 1998; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Vogelsang & Astin, 2000; Wamg, 2000). Smith and colleagues (2010) described the relationship between the frequency of volunteering, regular, occasional and non-volunteering, and 11 benefits of volunteering as derived from the literature (Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006; Musick & Wilson, 2007). Regular volunteering was found to be the strongest predictor of benefits, followed by occasional volunteers and then non-volunteers. The relationship between the frequency and benefits of volunteering indicated significant differences in leadership skills, service requirements, self-satisfaction, opportunity to learn new things, building trust among people in society, and recognition from colleagues/friends.

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Unfortunately, few studies have examined the consequences of volunteer work in the field of aging during college as related student job expectation upon graduation and feelings about working with the older adult population. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether volunteering in the field of aging affects students’ desire to work with older adults upon graduation, and if volunteering affects their job-related feelings of the older adult population.

Method

Participants

The research was performed by implementing a survey questionnaire to study college students’ work preference. Participants in this research were selected at random from college students attending a large university in the southern United States. Thirty-three students participated in the study, and out of those that answered questionnaires, only 30 surveys were completely filled out and included in analysis.

The volunteer work for each student participant totaled 30 hours. However, participants could not volunteer more than one hour each day. Thus, participants visited the Dementia Care Unit or the Long-Term Care facility at least 30 separate times to complete their volunteer work. Students’ usual duties were to take care of the older adults and to assist with the recreational activity programs.

Instruments and Procedure

Immediately prior to and following their volunteer service, participants were asked to complete the survey. The survey was completed anonymously. The survey questionnaire consisted of sections including employment desires following graduation, questions of their feelings toward working with older adults, and demographic questions. The employment desires
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questions included four different groups based on ages (working with young children, adolescents, adults, and older adults) that respondents ranked “most like” to “least like.” The 11 questions about participants’ thoughts of working with older adults were measured on a five-point Likert type scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree) as a means to determine students’ feeling towards a group of age 55 year olds and older. Questions included “I have had previous experience working with this group”, “I am most comfortable working with this group”, and “Overall feeling volunteer work for older adults.” Demographic questions included sex and academic classification (i.e. year in college).

Data Analysis

The software of Statistical Package for the Social Science 20 (SPSS 20) was utilized to analyze data reliability, the descriptive statistics of participation, and the comparison of volunteer work in the field of aging and their desired job and job-related feeling of the older adult population. Reliability of the 11 questions of feeling items were confirmed by a Cronbach alpha coefficient measurement (α = .94). Measurement for the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was also examined using SPSS.

Results

The majority of students (10 males; 20 females) who completed the volunteer work were sophomores (10 students) and juniors (13 students). Two freshmen, four seniors, and one graduate student also completed the survey questionnaire.

Table 1 shows mean differences before and after participants’ volunteer work and their desired employment upon graduation. Before volunteering, students’ least desired employment was working with older adults (ages 55 +). Post volunteering, they still rated working with older adults (ages 55 +) as their least desired job.
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adults as the least desired employment based on the age choices. However, the mean difference of working with older adults before and after volunteering changed from 3.2 to 3.13.

The desire to work following graduation with only children (age 3-10) decreased after volunteering with older adults. However, the desires of employment with adolescents (age 11-18), adults (ages 19-54) and older adults (ages 55 +) were higher following the volunteer experience with older adults.

A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test found no significant evidence to show the volunteer work was able to influence college students’ desired employment upon graduation based on the age group. Thus, the effects of volunteering with older adults in the Dementia Care Unit and Long-Term Care facility was not statistically significant on students’ desired employment in gerontological jobs upon graduation.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment desires upon graduation</th>
<th>Pre-Volunteer</th>
<th>Post-Volunteer</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working with young children (age 3-10)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.06)</td>
<td>2.60 (1.22)</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with adolescents (age 11-18)</td>
<td>2.13 (.86)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.00)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with adults (ages 19-54)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.16)</td>
<td>2.17 (1.15)</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with older adults (ages 55 +)</td>
<td>3.2 (1.13)</td>
<td>3.13 (.82)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scale ranged from “1, Most Like” to “4, Least Like.”

How students felt before and after volunteering with older adults is reported in Table 2.

The items that received the highest mean ratings, noting a disagreement with the statement, before volunteering were: “This matches the desired age I want to work with,” and “I can relate to this group.” In contrast, the lowest mean ratings, indicating an agreement with the statement,
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of items before volunteering were: “I have had exposure through personal experience,” and “My family supports this choice.” Overall, all of 11 questions received a mean that ranged between “2” which means “agree” and “3” which means “neutral.”

Conversely, after volunteering with older adults, the highest mean rated items were: “This is a setting I want to work in,” and once again, “This matches the desired age I want to work with.” However, the lowest mean ratings of items after volunteering were: “I have had direct exposure through school/classes,” and once again, “I have had exposure through personal experience,” and “My family supports this choice.” These three mean ratings of items received results less than agreed score of “2”.

The differences in the means of the pre-volunteer and post-volunteer items revealed that only the question; “This is a setting I want to work in” decreased in the participants’ feelings after volunteering, while means of the other 11 questions indicated increase in mean differences.

The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test of feeling volunteer work for older adults indicated there were statistical mean differences in “I have had previous experience working with this group”, “I have had non-direct exposure through school/classes”, “I have had direct exposure through school/classes”, and “Overall feeling volunteer work for older adults.” Furthermore, this result suggested volunteer work for older adults statistically would influence college students’ positive job related feeling toward working with older adults.
### Table 2

*Comparison of feelings about working with older adults before and after volunteering.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volunteer work with older adults (age 55+)</th>
<th>Pre-Volunteer Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-Volunteer Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Difference Pre – Post</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am most comfortable working with this group</td>
<td>2.57 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.37 (1.10)</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a setting I want to work in</td>
<td>2.67 (.99)</td>
<td>2.80 (1.00)</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel competent working in this area</td>
<td>2.43 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.03)</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This matches the desired age I want to work with</td>
<td>2.93 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.77 (1.13)</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had previous experience working with this group</td>
<td>2.83 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.27)</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.005**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had non-direct exposure through school/classes</td>
<td>2.83 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.30 (1.02)</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had direct exposure through school/classes</td>
<td>2.60 (1.13)</td>
<td>1.97 (.93)</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.005**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had exposure through personal experience</td>
<td>2.00 (.91)</td>
<td>1.97 (.96)</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can relate to this group</td>
<td>2.93 (.98)</td>
<td>2.50 (1.04)</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers are supportive of this choice</td>
<td>2.33 (.76)</td>
<td>2.07 (.91)</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family supports this choice</td>
<td>2.10 (.76)</td>
<td>1.93 (.91)</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall feeling volunteer work for older adults</td>
<td>2.57 (.33)</td>
<td>2.28 (.31)</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.008**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01. Individuals were asked to indicate how they feel. Item were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree.”
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Discussion

This study sought to determine whether volunteer work in the field of aging affects students’ desire to be employed with a certain aged population upon graduation, and to evaluate participants’ job-related feeling of the older adult population. The results of this study suggest that volunteering specific groups such as older adults may potentially increase student interest in working in that area. This supports previous research that reported volunteer experiences with older adults could predict college students’ willingness to accept jobs in aging upon graduation (Curl et al., 2005). However, working with older adults was rated as the least desired job for college students before volunteering which remained so after the experience. However, the rate of its mean difference might infer that students definitely had a better perspective of working with older people.

Curl and colleagues (2005) reported that even if students had volunteer experience with older adults, 63% were unwilling to accept a job in the field of aging because of interests in a different population, lack of direction or certainty about type of job they wanted, and plans to apply to graduate school. Another study by Cummings and colleagues (2005) also indicated overall contact frequency with older adults personally or professionally was a significant predictor of a student’s interest in aging related work, but uncertainty regarding pay and job status are factors that prohibited accepting employment in gerontological fields.

Previous studies described that students’ negative attitudes and feelings toward older adults would be the main reasons not to take jobs in the field of aging (Curl et al., 2005; Scharlach et al., 2000). However, this study provides a small insight into the possibility of increasing students’ positive feeling toward older adults by doing volunteer work in the field of aging. These results are supported by Scharlach and Robinson (2005), who noted that providing
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students’ training in working with older adults enabled them to increase their confidence and have better performance when working in the field of aging.

Implications

The current study was undertaken to enable a better understanding of college students’ desire to be employed with and job-related feelings toward older adults. Based on these findings, it is strongly suggested to implement strategies or marketing to increase students’ interests in pursuing careers in the field of aging. Faculty members and administrators need to enhance and implement creative and effective curriculums that prepare students to work in the field of aging. In order to implement a quality gerontological curriculum, faculty and administrators need to be well trained in proper profession-based methods for improving the experience of students who show interest in careers linked to older adults. Previous research indicated that several educational institutions had difficulties finding faculty members with interests and experience in gerontology (Kropf, 2002; Scharlach et al., 2000). Kropf (2003) suggested that institutional support or research collaborations might be a way to develop faculty and administrators’ competence in the field of aging.

At the institutional level, the best ways to get students interested in aging does not come only through the provision of courses or programs of gerontology, but also through collaboration across campus with introductions to aging integrated into other disciplines. A leisure and aging course, for example, could be taught by the leisure program, while an older adult health course could be integrated into the exercise science program. These courses from other programs would assist students in seeing the world of gerontology through the eyes of their chosen majors and enrich their knowledge of potential customers and participants that they will be working with in their careers. Similarly, it can be beneficial to all parties involved to promote positive

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relationships outside of the college campus with older citizens of the community. These relationships would enable students to engage in service learning opportunities provided by administrators, professionals, and citizens of community.

Last, it is important for faculty and administrators to understand how to best utilize teaching methodologies to spark students’ interests in pursuing careers in aging while they are in college. Many college students have indicated that academic effort and achievement are the best way to secure the job that they want. However, the reality of job demands might be different from what the student expected. One way to overcome these problematic situations and to facilitate students’ interests in the field of aging could be to have course projects or assignments that require contact with older adults. Experiential learning or trainings such as internships or fieldwork through required courses could increase students’ positive feelings toward older adults. More specifically, volunteering and service learning opportunities might be the most beneficial ways to increase students’ interests in the field of aging as the current study proved.

Limitations and Future Studies

It is important to understand the limitations of this study. One of the main limitations was a low participation rate that makes generalization to the entire population of college students difficult. Results also cannot be generalized to different majors because the students who participated in this research study were from only one program. This study was conducting at a large university in a southern city in the United States. This poses difficulties in generalizing results to different regions or the entire population in the U.S. Future studies are needed that consider different regions with an increased number of participants, which could provide more generalizability.
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Although this study was able to demonstrate differences in students’ job-related feeling toward an aging population through volunteering, this study did not interpret the relationship between demographic variances and the aforementioned factors. Previous research indicated that there were differences created by the race or ethnicity in students’ intentions to volunteer during college (Cruce & Moore, 2007). The current study did not collect information related to the race or ethnicity of participants. Similarly, there may be differences in desired employment upon graduation or feeling toward older adults due to the classification of the student. Senior or graduate students’ job expectations in the field of aging may be different from those of freshmen. The sample of this study limited the ability to separate data based on classification. A future study would be able to correct this limitation by including a larger sample size and providing detailed measurement of relationships between demographics including sex, race or ethnicity, academic classification, and the aforementioned factors.

Another limitation of this study was that the participant volunteers in this research were all studying in the field of aging and were required to volunteer as part of a course. Volunteering is usually non-obligatory helping by definition (Penner, 2004). The research by Beehr and colleagues (2010) indicated that non-obligatory volunteers had stronger commitment and satisfaction, while participants who were required to volunteer had less intrinsic motivation and satisfaction. Utilizing non-obligatory volunteers can explain this limitation and possible influences on the overall results related to students’ career choice and feelings toward older adults.
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References


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