Perceptions of the Value in Volunteerism and Internships by Undergraduate Students in a School of Health Administration: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper examines the perceived value of volunteerism and internships by students and their potential for helping to mold future healthcare administration careers. These perceptions were measured across all four semesters of a Bachelor of Health Administration program. Examined were demographic situations which are facilitators and barriers to student perceptions of volunteerism and internships in general. Seemingly, these demographic factors which specifically included race and first generation college student status had a significant influence in student perception. Overall, the data shows students understand the significance of volunteerism and/or internships, however they do not understand the importance of taking part in them to foster connections to the industry. We as educators first must realize that our students arrive into our classrooms with preconceived notions regarding the value of volunteerism and internships, perhaps without context or knowledge of professional and interpersonal benefits which they can receive by taking part in these activities. Increasingly, we as educators accept the role to provide instruction, experiences, and tools to enhance our students' abilities in order to catapult them towards career success.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Student perceptions on volunteerism and the reasons for doing so range from resume building to eventual assistance with job placement. However, previous studies on the subject of student volunteerism show that in an environment which is characterized by high competition, volunteering has the potential to serve as a signaling device by potential employees that they possess the qualities that the potential employer is looking for that would make them the candidate of choice.

Volunteerism benefits students as it allows students the ability of early identification of skills which they might be good at or need improvement in. This skill identification also helps them to flourish in a work environment and develop skills of self-reflection and an ability to understand the need for continuing education. Volunteerism allows for opportunities for participants to engage in society and enhance their feelings of inclusion, self-validation, and belonging.

Volunteering by students when it comes to resume building is an understood activity motivating students to take part. However, research shows that students are not more likely to take an active part in volunteering to build their resume than any other student with different motives This consideration makes what we do as educators much more important as we leverage this knowledge into success for our students.

The data collected as a part of this research was collected as a pilot study to ascertain student perceptions regarding the importance of volunteerism and internships on their chosen career in healthcare administration with their BHA degree. This study examined students as they are progressing through the four semesters of the program and with minors in the program as well. The program is only offered by admission to junior and senior level students who undergo a rigorous admissions process. The aim of this study was to ascertain how the program could do a better job in preparation of students in this important part of their future success.

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OBJECTIVE

Identify and analyze perceptions and factors surrounding volunteerism and internships by students as a tool to increase their professional presence in the field.

METHODS

This research was conducted under an approved IRB exemption via a survey instrument which was specifically designed for this study. Students included in the networking study were chosen by their degree classification. Students are cohorted into semesters and as minors. There are 233 students enrolled as BHA majors or minors within the program currently. A random subsample (n = 204) was drawn from the larger sample for inclusion in the study. Of this subsample, 194 (95.09%) were eligible to be included in the study. Eligibility was determined via completed versus incomplete surveys received.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

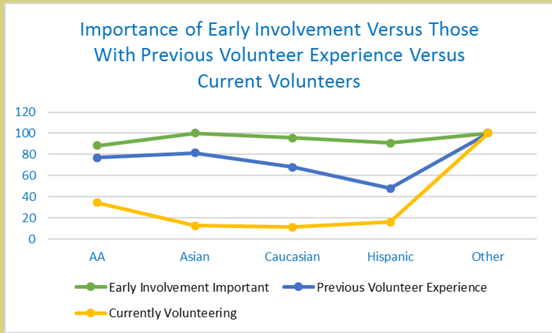
Variable	% (n)
Gender	
Male	23.2% (n=45)
Female	76.8% (n=149)
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	13.5% (n=26)
Asian	8.8% (n=17)
Caucasian	37.3% (n=72)
Hispanic	39.4% (n=76)
Other	1.0% (n=2)
Veteran Status	
Veteran of Military service	5.7% (n=11)
Non-Veteran	93.3% (n=181)

Variable	% (n)
First Generation College Student	
Yes	41.2% (n=80)
No	57.7% (n=112)
Semester of Health Administration Program	
1	29.5% (n=46)
2	20.5% (n=32)
3	16.0% (n=25)
4	7.1% (n=11)
Minor	26.9% (n=42)

**results which were erroneous were removed from table for statistical purposes*

PERCEIVED STUDENT IMPORTANCE

Student perceptions of early involvement in the health administration field were also high (92.7% overall), but erratic when considered by race. Lowest perceptions were held by African American students (88.5%), followed by Hispanic (90.7%), Caucasian (95.8%) and Asian and Others (100%). These numbers compared to those who have ever volunteered in any healthcare environment and those who are currently volunteering in a healthcare environment are staggeringly different in comparison.



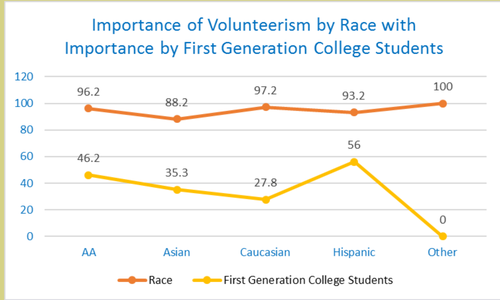
References available on request

IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERISM BY RACE VERSUS FIRST GENERATION STATUS

An intriguing result gained from analysis of the data was that all students (94.8%) felt that volunteering in any type of healthcare atmosphere would help them with their future careers. However, when broken down via majors (93.9%) versus minors (97.6%) we saw that there was a greater importance found by those who were minors overall (3.7%). This increased perception of importance by minors was seen in most areas throughout the rest of the study as well.

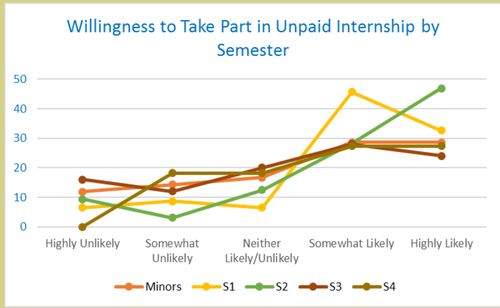
Race also seemed to play a significant role in the perceptions of importance of volunteerism as well. The lowest importance was perceived by those of Asian descent (88.2%), followed by Hispanics (93.2%). African Americans, Caucasians, and Others were at the 96th percentile or above.

92.5% of those who were first-generation college students saw importance as well. When we transpose college students who classified themselves as first generation college students, we can see a huge opportunity for learning, as overall numbers were much decreased from overall importance. An interesting flaw is seen statistically in the "other" category as well, which is undoubtedly related to the sample size of the "other" category (n = 2).



UNPAID INTERNSHIP WILLINGNESS

Students most likely to take part in unpaid internships are those who identified themselves as first or second semester students in the program. Those students who were further along in the program seemed much less likely to be willing to take part in unpaid opportunities as they neared graduation.



CONCLUSIONS

Students need to begin to understand the actual value of taking part in internship or volunteer opportunities outside school. To understand this actual value, professors must become mentors instead of purely educators. We must begin, or amplify, our efforts to stress the importance of involvement in career fields in general. The more involved students are, the more experience they gain, the more people they know, and the circle of success begins. The more students do to break into their chosen fields early, the more entrenched they can become. An early goal of most students is to have a job waiting for them when they graduate (or earlier). Helping them to grow their professional networks and experience through volunteerism can have very positive results for them in this area.