

## WHY YOUNG PEOPLE ARE VOLUNTEERING IN RECORD NUMBERS

**I**t has been well documented that young people today are volunteering at unprecedented rates. A new CIRCLE Working Paper by Lewis A. Friedland and Shauna Morimoto examines the motivating factors behind this rise in volunteering.

The researchers found that for middle- and upper-middle-class high school students “resume-padding” is one of the motivating factors driving the increase in volunteering. According to Dr. Friedland, “Much of the reported volunteerism was shaped by the perception that voluntary and civic activity is necessary to get into any college; and the better the college (or, more precisely, the higher the perception of the college in the status system) the more volunteerism students believed was necessary. Many of the middle- and upper-middle-class youth are explicitly volunteering for the purpose of what they themselves called ‘resume-padding.’”

In addition to the resume-padding, the study finds that several other factors are motivating the rise in volunteer activity, and these factors vary by class and racial position, ideological disposition, and religious involvement. Finally, the report contains a typology of youth volunteering.

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The study is based on detailed interviews of almost 100 residents of Madison, Wisconsin, between the ages of 14 and 19, sampled from various schools and community centers. Madison is a city with robust civic engagement, so the sample included a wide variety of civic behaviors.

### INCREASED PRESSURE TO ATTEND COLLEGE RESHAPES CIVIC MOTIVATORS

Surveys have found that high school students of all classes, with virtually no significant racial, ethnic, or gender differences, expect to attend college. According to Dr. Friedland, “We found that students recognize that their future life chances rest on ‘college,’ whether defined as the local community college, the lesser state university, a public flagship, or the ‘best’ private schools, much as an earlier generation depended on a high school diploma.” This realization in turn has created anxiety among high-school-aged youth about how they can improve their chances for college admission. Under these circumstances, young people of all classes are approaching service as (in part) an instrumental price to pay for college admission.

Moreover, the research shows that young people do not understand the criteria for admission to the different types of higher education. Young people interviewed in the study widely believed that significant service is a requirement for admission to all types of schools, includ-

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ing technical colleges and state schools in which a moderate GPA virtually guarantees admission. However, these service expectations only come into play in genuinely selective schools, those with an admissions rate of 50 percent or less, and even here the amount of service only becomes a major criterion in highly selective schools. Nevertheless, the researchers found that a kind of "service inflation" has spread downward in the class structure.

## TYOLOGY OF YOUTH VOLUNTEERS

Alongside of the resume-padding, however, the researchers did find significant other forms of activity, with different motivations that themselves varied by class and racial position, ideological disposition, and religious involvement. Following is a typology of volunteers developed from the interviews:

1. The first type Friedland and Morimoto identify is college bound youth, of the middle- and upper-middle-classes. They produce the majority of service-based volunteerism. These are the young people most engaged in resume padding for college, and they often do so self-consciously, with awareness of their own motives and little or no sense that this instrumental orientation compromises their motives. For example, one student said he does "as much service-learning as I can because they like that apparently." Asked where he got this impression he replied: "I don't know, it's just what a lot of my graduating friends have told me. The more service-learning, the more community service you have, like the better you look and the more it'll count for your bad GPA or whatever."
2. A subtype of the middle-class resume padders are well-integrated college bound youth, often from civically- or politically-oriented middle- and upper-middle-class families, who have articulated ideological or moral motivations for engaging in civic or political activity. These young people are also engaged in resume padding, but their motives are mixed. They simply assume that these activities are what they should do, and need to do, but also have other motivations.
3. A further subtype of resume padders are those whom Friedland and Morimoto call "civic youth." They are young people engaged in explicit and highly civic activities, for example membership on youth boards. *Continued on page 5*

**CIRCLE** (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 and is funded predominantly by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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organizational memberships), political opportunities (mobilization efforts), schooling, work experiences, and political activity of these young people.

Two reports have emerged from the survey. The first divided the sample into two groups: "workers" (young people who claimed that they were not currently attending school and had their highest level of education as something less than a bachelor's degree) and "students" (young people who were seeking a bachelor's degree as well as those who had completed bachelor's degrees and were at the time of the survey pursuing advanced degrees). The full report, "CIRCLE Working Paper 36: The Political Participation of Working Youth and College Students," can be downloaded from [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

In the second report, Jarvis, Montoya and Mulvoy segmented their

youth respondents in a novel way, examining three categories: "students," "workers," and "student-workers." In this project, respondents were coded as "students" if they were not currently employed and if they were currently attending any educational institution (whether it was a two or four year college, or a certificate program); "workers," if they were not currently enrolled in any type of educational institution and if they had not completed a bachelor's degree; and "student-workers," if they were currently enrolled in any type of educational institution and were currently employed.

In general, student-workers proved more engaged than students who are not working. The report, entitled "CIRCLE Working Paper 37: The Political Participation of College Students, Working-Students and Working Youth," discusses the results in detail and can be downloaded from [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org). 

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From the outside, they would be identified as among the most highly

civic young people in the community, and indeed in many respects they are. But their motives are also complex, linked to both resume padding and social position.

4. A fourth type, religious young people, varied in their motives, some engaging in civic activity out of an explicit sense of religious duty, either to God or to their church community. For others, although religious motives and institutions were a significant part of the background and language, civic and community activity seemed to be linked to resume padding motives.
5. Another type the researchers identified were working- and lower-class young people, often minorities, that they encountered in community based-clubs, and neighborhood after-school centers. These young people had strong community orientations that seemed go beyond immediate self-interest to an expressed interest in "helping the community" and, specifically, helping the younger children, their brothers and sisters, and neighborhood children, to build a better life.
6. A subset of the sample were politically engaged youth, with explicitly anti-establishment orientations, that sometimes were ideological, but often seemed visceral, linked to an awareness of the unfairness of their life situation. Although the stereotype of radical youth may be

those who are from more privileged, middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, many were from working and lower-middle-class families.

7. Finally, there was a loose type that Friedland and Morimoto call cultural rebels, with a loose cultural anti-authoritarianism that expressed itself in cultural identification with movements like hip-hop, or certain variants. Both motives and forms of engagement are diffuse.

#### TRANSMITTING CIVIC AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The report concludes that the changing motivations behind volunteering could have implications for future civic capital. Dr. Friedland notes, "If the normative connections to community that may have characterized civic engagement in the past are, indeed, becoming hollowed out in a middle-class under enormous pressure to retain its position, the transmission of social and civic capital across generations may be more precarious than survey data alone indicate" The full report, entitled "CIRCLE Working Paper 40: The Changing Lifeview of Young People: Risk, Resume-Padding, and Civic Engagement," can be downloaded from [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org). 