RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

YOUTH VOLUNTEER MOTIVATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In a recent CIRCLE Working Paper (#40) entitled, "The Changing Lifeworld of Young People: Risk, Resume-Padding and Civic Engagement," Lewis A. Friedland and Shauna Morimoto attempted to "reconstruct the most significant networks and institutions that shaped the lives of young people…[and] to demonstrate in some depth the quality of connection and disconnection of young people to these networks." One of the results of the study is a typology of youth volunteerism, which consists of seven motivations, influenced by race and ethnicity, class position, ideological disposition, and religious involvement (see Around the CIRCLE v.3 i.2 for a summary of this typology).

Morimoto is quick to emphasize that although there has been a rise in youth volunteering, there is no evidence on what role resume-padding motivations play in this increase. "We don't want [resume-padding] to come across as the only reason kids [volunteer]…I don't think there are easy answers but it brings up a lot of questions."

In addition, Friedland and Morimoto identify and discuss one factor that emerged as a thread, in varying degrees, throughout their discussions with young people in Madison, Wisconsin—that "resume-padding" is an implicit motivation for much of youth volunteerism. Friedland and Morimoto find that "service inflation" has embedded itself into the dialogue of college applicants. Often young people report that they hope volunteer activities will assist in achieving admission.

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The research suggests that understanding youth volunteer motivations, or what motivates a particular young person to volunteer, can have practical implications for the way volunteer programs are managed. Some organizations have already taken their volunteers' motivations into consideration when designing their programs.

HOW DO MOTIVATIONS AFFECT PROGRAM MANAGEMENT?

Friedland and Morimoto's findings suggest that understanding how to recruit young people can be tailored to what the purpose of the program is and the people the program seeks to involve. A knowledge of who you are trying to engage can help to bring in people who will either identify with what you are trying to do and want to be a part of it, or who will recognize that they have something to gain from the experience—not mutually exclusive motivations.

Sarah Seames, Coordinator of Community Service Programs at Bowdoin College, suggests that program organizers consider motivations when connecting students with various volunteer opportunities. "When you're dealing with community partners you need to think about what their needs are and send them volunteers who will fulfill their commitments." At the same time, Seames argues that "the motivation isn't as important as the experience that [students] have with it." Seames' experience suggests that despite the many youth motivations for volunteering, the actual volunteer experience could have a larger impact on young people.

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HOW MIGHT MOTIVATIONS AFFECT ANTICIPATED YOUTH CIVIC OUTCOMES?

Friedland and Morimoto offer that "service inflation plausibly explains in part, the gap between political and civic activity described in "The Civic and Political Health of the Nation" (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins 2002)…Our findings call into question some of the vibrancy apparent in the high rate of youth volunteerism." Friedland goes on to suggest that their research may suggest a "hollowing out of motivation, not an establishment of motivation" that will be a foundation for volunteering in the future.

The context in which young people are volunteering can serve to influence motivations. For example, Julie Ayers, Service Learning Specialist at the Maryland State Department of Education, reports that her experience has been "that when students are involved in a really well designed project they get excited when they see that they can make a difference…it changes students' self-perceptions." The State of Maryland instituted a state-wide service learning requirement for high school graduation and has developed a series of guidelines to inform local school systems about implementing the requirement, which includes seven best practices. Ayers emphasizes that the quality of the service learning experience affects youth civic development: "it has to be a well-executed project. Students know what's busy work."

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Furthermore, Friedland suggests that "there has to be a strong link between the actual interest and motives of young people and the work." Many academic institutions are beginning to build community service into a range of academic courses as a means of engaging both faculty and students in civic work.

HOW MIGHT MOTIVATIONS AFFECT COMMUNITY IMPACT?

Assessing and "mapping" community needs is a popular approach to encouraging youth civic engagement. This may suggest that being deliberate about developing clear objectives for a volunteer project can not only be educational for the youth involved, but can also lead to more genuine and sustainable relationships within communities. Some programs have found that the motivations of their youth volunteers change after their volunteer experience.

The National Honor Society (NHS) has been working on ways to be deliberate about the community impact of their chapters'

volunteer work. The National Honor Society and National Junior Honor Society (NJHS) have chapters in over 20,000 schools nationwide. While each chapter is required to organize one service project per year, local chapters decide what this project will be and what additional volunteer activities should be pursued. Decisions vary by school, with one high school in the Midwest requiring that students do 100 hours of volunteering.

"The variety of projects depend on crises that are in the news and local needs that emerge," says David Cordts, Associate Director of NHS and NJHS. However, at the moment, Cordts says, "We are working on creating a tool for chapters to do a needs assessment of their community and school." Making community-based outcomes one of the goals of the volunteer activity may have a positive effect on how youth approach their volunteer work and consequently have a positive effect on the community. ✦