

VOLUNTEERING FOR THE STUDENTS IN BRAŞOV

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Abstract: *The present article aims at presenting the results of a study, whose main objective was to evaluate the degree of involvement of the students of Transilvania University in Braşov in volunteering. By a quantitative methodology, the study manages to capture relevant data concerning the areas where students activate or would like to activate as volunteers, the reasons for which they volunteer or not, the benefits and cost of this activity. The study also highlights the need to set up an online volunteering platform dedicated to students and meant to provide in an accessible and organized frame useful information to all those willing to get involved.*

Keywords: *volunteer, students, online volunteering platform.*

1. Introduction

Volunteering represents that type of activity ‘of public interest organized for the benefit of other persons or of the society, organized by private or public law companies, without remuneration, individually or in groups’, with multiple benefits for both the volunteer and for the community and society in general (*The Law of Volunteering*, 2014).

In our country, although the interest in volunteering, especially the one manifested by national and international non-governmental organizations, has gradually increased since 1990, the level of involvement has remained low. This reality is also confirmed by the results of a European survey carried out in 2011 which claims that in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Poland, etc., volunteering involvement is well below the European average (TNS Opinion & Social, 2011).

According to the same survey, the most important indicator of participation in volunteering activities is not age or gender, but education, those with higher education are more likely to engage in volunteering. The results of a national survey conducted by the Centre for Marketing and Social Prognosis (CMSP, 2013) support this idea, by presenting the profile of the Romanian volunteer as follows: Young pupil or student / employee with higher education, motivated by solidarity (40%) and the desire to improve professional experience (15%).

Being aware of this reality and wishing to increase the number of students from Transilvania University in Braşov who get involved in volunteering activities, in the project called UTBVolunteer, funded by the PNCD III European and International Cooperation program - ERANET-FLAG, we proposed setting up the first online volunteering

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platform in the country, dedicated to the students of Transilvania University of Braşov only, a virtual 'meeting place' for all those keen on socializing, self- and other-awareness and personal and professional self-development, with public and private organizations from Braşov County, interested in working with volunteers. By means of the platform, students will find information about various volunteering opportunities and about organizations interested in working with volunteers in one place.

In order to set up the volunteering platform, we have considered it necessary to evaluate first to what extent the students of Transilvania University of Braşov get currently involved in volunteering activities and if they consider it appropriate to set up an online platform, the results of the survey being the subject of this article.

2. Methodology

Starting from the pursued objective, we have considered it appropriate to choose a quantitative method of data collection, the instrument consisting of a questionnaire that was applied to two categories of students, those who volunteer and those who do not.

Data collection was made by means of the application Google Docs, which allowed us both to build the tool and to analyze the data. We have chosen this option because we have aimed at including in our sample, mainly, students who usually access the Internet, in general, and social networks, in particular.

The questionnaire link along with a message meant to explain the purpose of the research were posted on the Facebook pages of the students from Transilvania University in Braşov. The questionnaire was filled in by a number of 116 students, both undergraduate and Master's Degree students, both volunteers and non-volunteers. The questionnaire filling-in session was closed after the invitation had been sent three times, and the respondents' response rate was close to 0.

3. Findings and Discussions

Of the total number of 116 respondents, students from the 18 faculties of Transilvania University in Braşov, 91 are enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree program and 25 in the Master's Degree program. Of those enrolled in the Master's program, 17 are in the first year and 8 are in the second year. Of the total number of respondents, 39.7% are in the first year (undergraduate + master), 30.2% in the second year (undergraduate + master) and 25% in the third year. The difference of 5.1% is for students in the 4th, 5th and 6th years, from faculties with more than 3 years of study.

For the respondents, *volunteering* means, first of all, a form of offering help, 34 of them stating that the first thing that comes to their mind when hearing the word volunteer is "help". Parker (2011) called this type of activity in which help or care for the welfare of others takes precedence and is offered in a disinterested way, "altruistic volunteering". Volunteering is also correlated with something offered "for free", with "development", "experience", "empathy" and "altruism". Thus, we can notice that students have mentioned in their answers both what one can or should offer in volunteering activities (help, empathy, altruism) and the benefits one can have (self-development, experience).

Of the students participating in the survey from Transilvania University in Braşov, less than a quarter (28) have stated that they are currently volunteers in a public or private organization. The largest number of volunteering students is enrolled at the Faculty of Sociology and Communication (7 students), followed, with an equal number by the students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration and the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science (4 students each).

3.1. Profile of volunteers from Transilvania University of Braşov

The volunteers of Transilvania University are mainly active in organizations in the **field of health, social services, and education**. The main **means** by which volunteering students found out about the existence of the organization is represented by *friends*, being closely followed by *school*. Posters rank third in this hierarchy, followed by online means (Facebook, organization's website). It is worth noting that mass media such as radio and television do not represent at the moment a way by means of which young people could find out about volunteering opportunities.

When asked to rank the most **effective means of promoting** volunteering, most volunteering students place *Facebook* and *events* dedicated to volunteering on the first position (21 students out of 28), followed by *friends* (20 out of 28) and *posters, flyers* (18 out of 28). What should be noted is the fact that *the online* really represents, in the opinion of volunteering students, an effective means of promoting volunteering. Arguments, in this direction, can be the answers to the open question "What other means do you consider useful for finding information about volunteering?" (Figure 1).

If they are on the Internet and socializing sites, where the majority are online, it is enough (female, 24 years, 2nd year, master)
Social media promotion (female, 22 years, 2nd year, undergraduate)
Social networks (female, 40 years, 2nd year, undergraduate)

Fig. 1. *Means of promoting volunteering*

I am the fictitious 'mother' of some children in the orphanage, I collect clothes from my acquaintances and toys, and when it is some child's birthday, I go with my relatives with a fancy cake, gifts and sweets for all the children. Given the fact that these kids are fed there, we have decided to spoil them just as parents do with their children. We bring them ice cream in summer, warm chocolate in winter, about a day a week we go to play with them, etc. (student, 18 years, 1st year)

Fig. 2. *Volunteering activities*

From their responses, we find out that volunteers get involved in a wide range of **activities**, from *waste cleaning, tree planting and first aid to fundraising and event organization, from work with other volunteers to donations*. One of the most touching responses to the question on volunteering activities when the one written in Figure 2.

Of the 6 possible response variants to the question "What is the reason for volunteering?", the students have chosen almost exclusively only two of them. The most important **reason** is the fact that this activity makes them *see things from a different*

perspective, 50% of them mentioning this reason, followed by the fact that by volunteering they can do something for *a cause they believe in* (40%). The fact that the experience as a volunteer matters in the CV is mentioned by only one of the respondents allows us to consider that students have motivations for getting involved in such activities that do not exclusively correlate with their professional training, just as the results of some studies reveal (Eley, 2003; Low, Butt, Ellis, & Davis Smith, 2007; Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006).

This idea is actually confirmed by student responses as to the **benefits** of volunteering. From their point of view, volunteering gives you the opportunity, first and foremost, to *get acquainted with new and interesting people* and to *develop various abilities*. The third important benefit is represented by the *promotion of human values* related to the community by the concern for those close to you.

When it comes to **cost** volunteers generally mention the material ones, *time* being considered the most important resource involved. Besides time they also mention: *energy, patience, involvement, and devotion*. However, it should be mentioned that *transport* is also an important cost mentioned by volunteers.

Transport is often a problem, especially in rural areas
 (male, 22 years, 1st year, undergraduate)
Transport, transport and transport (female, 24 years, 2nd year, master)
Travel costs (female, 1st year, master)

Fig. 3. *The costs of volunteering*

As for the usefulness of setting up a volunteering online platform 78.6% of the volunteering students have considered it to be generally necessary (35.7%) and to a very large extent (42.9%). Similarly, a significant percentage (89.3%) of the volunteering respondents stated that they would like to participate in volunteering activities by accessing the online platform of Transilvania University in Braşov. From their point of view, the main **benefits** of such a platform are the following: “you know where you can look for information about volunteering offers”, “the diversity of volunteering offers”, and the possibility to find information much quicker and more conveniently.

The information that students would like to find on the online volunteering platform refers to the following aspects: the description of the organization, the projects, the events and the activities of the organizations, volunteering offers that should include clear specifications on how to select volunteers, the tasks and work schedule, the benefits and testimonials from volunteering students.

The volunteering participating respondents consider that the main **ways in which students can be stimulated** to access the online volunteering platform are: *online promotion campaigns* (Facebook pages, monthly notifications on institutional email) and *offline* (conferences, presentations during the teaching activities, presentation films, events organized on this topic, awards offered or recognition from the university).

3.2. Profile of non-volunteers from *Transilvania* University in Braşov

The non-volunteering students accounted for 75.9% of the total number of students participating in this survey, and from their point of view the two main **reasons** they do

not involve in volunteering activities for are to an equal extent (33%), *the lack of information about the locations* where they could volunteer and *their lack of time*.

Even if they do not volunteer, the non-volunteering students know that this type of activity involves a series of **benefits**, and the most important benefits mentioned are almost identical to those stated by volunteers even if they do not obtain the same score (*you develop different skills and promote human values related to the community, by the concern for those close to you*). There are differences if we compared the three most important benefits. Thus, while the volunteers include in this top the fact that you get to *know new, interesting people*, the non-volunteers consider an important benefit the fact *that you feel useful*.

When it comes to **costs**, the non-volunteers, almost without exception, state that *time* is the main cost of volunteering, followed by *money* (for transport or food). They mention, just as in the case of the volunteering students, a long series of other resources the volunteer offers in his activity, such as: *patience, care, energy, emotions, responsibility, attention, dedication, passion, desire, ambition, empathy, kindness*. All these features do nothing but confirm the theory that the volunteer has an altruistic personality.

If they were to get involved in volunteering activities, the non-volunteering students would like to work in different **fields**, but the highest scores were obtained in fields such as: *education and research* (18.2%), *culture and art* (18.2%), *health* (14.8%), *sports and recreation* (13.6%), *human rights protection* (10.2%), *social services and environmental protection* (8% each).

Thus, in choosing the organizations present on the future online volunteering platform, we will take into consideration the answers of the non-volunteers and we will try to cover all 7 areas of interest.

Although they are not currently volunteers, almost a third of the non-volunteers (28 non-volunteering students out of 88) are familiar with institutions where they could volunteer, the most popular being the Red Cross. Thus, 8 out of 28 mention this organization. From the analysis of the responses, it is clear that organizations in the social field are most visible, while few of them mention organizations that activate in other areas, such as: *animal protection or human rights*.

The most frequent means of information from which the non-volunteering students found out about the above organizations are: *friends* (57.1%), *school* (42.9%) and *Facebook* (21.4%). By comparing the responses of the volunteers to those of the non-volunteers, we notice great similarities, meaning that the first two media occupy the same positions for all the respondents. There are noticeable differences with the means ranking 3rd: for the volunteers this place is taken by *flyers and leaflets*, while for the non-volunteers there is *Facebook*.

Just as in the case of volunteers, the answers given by the non-volunteers to the following two questions ("To what extent do you consider that the following information means would be useful to volunteering students?" and "What other means would be useful for finding volunteering information?") allow us to consider that the online environment is among the most effective ways of informing students and of promoting volunteering.

Moreover, the non-volunteering students also mention: *promoting volunteering in faculties by organizations, by volunteers, leaflets, seminars, workshops, etc.*

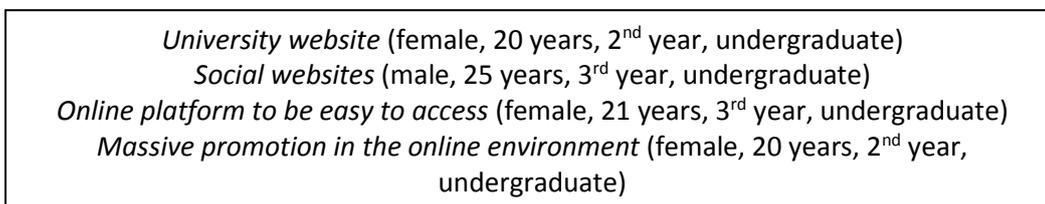


Fig. 4. Means of finding volunteering

Just as the volunteers, the non-volunteering respondents consider, to a large extent (71.58%) that an **online volunteering platform would be very useful** for those who are interested in finding out about organizations that need volunteers, and, respectively, about the volunteering activities and projects available. Similarly, the existence of such a platform is considered to be able to increase the interest of students in volunteering. Thus, 74 out of 88 non-volunteers consider that this is possible to a large extent (43 respondents) and to a very large extent (31 respondents).

By centralizing the data, we can notice that 73 of the non-volunteers, (83.9%), and 98 out of a total of 116 respondents (84.48%) express their willingness to participate in volunteering activities in the community by accessing the university's online platform. The data entitle us to believe that a large part of the non-volunteers could become volunteers thanks to the existence of the platform.

This platform, from their point of view, **is useful** because *you know where you can find information about volunteering offers* (69 non-volunteer students) and *you find them quickly and more conveniently* (47 non-volunteering students).

The information that the non-volunteering students would like to find on the volunteering platform is the same as the volunteers have mentioned, even if they are expressed differently: the organization's description, the projects, the events and the activities carried out by the organizations, the volunteering offers that should include clear specifications on how to select volunteers, the tasks and work schedule, the benefits and testimonials from volunteering students.

Beside **the online and offline means** mentioned by the volunteers, by which the students could be stimulated to access the online volunteering platform, the non-volunteers indicate an unusual means, namely, *supplementary credits* awarded to the students who get involved in such activities, besides those stipulated in the curricula.

4. Conclusions

Even if the number of the volunteering students in the total number of students participating in the study is low, the overall perception of volunteering is positive, by evaluating this activity as one with many benefits. A large number of the non-volunteering respondents state that they are interested in getting involved in volunteering activities, which proves a valorisation of this type of activity.

When we talk about the reasons for which students get involved in volunteering, we can notice that they are similar to the ones of Romanian students from other university centres, as well (e.g. Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iaşi, University of Oradea), the desire to help and to acquire experience representing some of the most important reasons for their involvement (Bacter & Marc, 2016; Netedu & Blaj, 2012).

Similarly, we can find a number of similarities between the Romanian students and those from other countries in the world when it comes to volunteering. The reasons for which the survey-participating Romanian students are volunteers, for example, are common to those of the students from Australia, Canada, the USA, Great Britain, New Zealand including: to help others, social contacts, develop skills, etc. (Auld, 2004; Smith, Holmes, Hasky-Leventhal, Cnaan, Handy & Brudney, 2010).

In the case of the students who are not volunteers or who have ceased to be involved in such activities we find similarities, so that the main reasons invoked by the Romanian students, and not only, are: the large number of other responsibilities and the lack of time (see Auld, 2004).

By analyzing the benefits of volunteering from the perspective of the survey-participating students, irrespective of whether they are volunteers or not, we find out that they derive from the three major categories of benefits identified in literature in the field (Hall et al., 2006; Musick & Wilson, 2008): unselfish / value determined benefits (for example, "you promote community-related human values by your concern for the one close to you"), instrumental / career-bound benefits (e.g. "you develop different skills") and social / acknowledgement-related benefits (e.g. "you know new, interesting people"). There are differences between volunteers and non-volunteers if we compared the top 3 most important benefits. Thus, while the survey-participating volunteers include in this top the fact that by means of these activities you *know new interesting people*, non-volunteers consider an important benefit the fact that *you feel useful*.

When it comes to costs, both volunteers and non-volunteers, almost without exception, state that *time* is the main cost of volunteering (see NCCPE, n.d.), followed by *money* (for transportation or food) (see also Chinman & Wandersman, 1999; Şimon, 2017). The survey-participating students also mention a long series of other resources from the psychological or personality sphere that the volunteer needs in his / her activity, such as: patience, care, energy, emotions, responsibility, attention, dedication, passion, desire, ambition, empathy, kindness.

The novelty of this article consists in the assessment by students of the need to set up an online volunteering platform. In this respect, the majority of the survey-participating students consider it necessary to create such a platform. From the point of view of many of them, there is a good chance that by means of this platform, with its numerous benefits (e.g. "you know where you can find information about volunteering offers, the diversity of volunteering offers, you find them much quicker and more conveniently") students' interest in volunteering will increase. This is also supported by the percent of about 85% of students who claim they might be interested in getting involved in volunteering by means of the platform.

The information provided by the students on the content of the online platform and on the ways in which they can be stimulated to access the platform will be valorized in the next phase of the project, being meant to support the platform's setting up and, then, its maintenance, but also to increase the number of students from Transilvania University in Braşov involved in volunteering activities.

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