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Present-day topics

## VOLUNTEER LANDMARKS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS FLORICA STEFANESCU<sup>1</sup> CLAUDIA OSVAT<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*The study addresses the issue of volunteering from the perspective of student participation in volunteer activities and the outcomes of such activities, in a faculty of social and human sciences. The paper is based on research literature and substantiates a research study among students of the aforementioned faculty. The conclusions summarize the results of the research and reflect the characteristics of student participation in volunteer activities, as well as the provisions necessary for the promotion of volunteer work among the youth.*

**Key words:** volunteering, students, activities, outcomes, provisions.

### Volunteering, concept, setting; a culture of volunteering

Initially associated with religious traditions, charitable activities, predominantly in the social field, volunteering is found nowadays among diverse lay traditions and activities ranging from the social to the medium, from underprivileged to profitable environments. Areas with large numbers of volunteers are: culture, sports and leisure, education and research, health, social action, defending rights, interests, or conventions etc. From an organizational perspective, volunteer work is closely linked to the activity of NGOs. One could say that the "maximalist, welfare state" and volunteering are inversely correlated, in the sense that volunteering develops on the basis of a residual intervention by the state in social problems, this background favouring the development of NGOs. Edith Archambaut (2002)<sup>3</sup> explained that the ratio between the numbers of volunteers and employees across different fields of activity also depends on the interest and involvement displayed by the state in meeting needs of general interest to the population. Therefore, in fields such as education and education, the ratio between the number of volunteers and employees is lower, not due to the volunteers' lack of interest in these areas, but because on the one hand, the state has a major role, and on the other hand, because these fields require highly trained human resources.

Volunteering has an important social-economic component, the range, structure and quality of volunteer actions varying according to the economic, social, cultural and political setting. There are differences between countries regarding the ratio of volunteers and employees, relating to both the range of the activities undertaken, and the distribution of such activities across fields. In developed countries such as the Scandic, the Anglo-Saxon or the Nordic countries, volunteer work is a widely spread activity, with around half of the population serving as volunteers<sup>4</sup>.

In socialist countries, volunteering was affected by the communist ideology, taking on the shape of patriotic voluntary activities, mandatory for that matter and thus perceived as a

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An. Inst.Cerc.Ec.,Gh. Zane”, t. 20, i.II, Iași, 2011, p.141-149

<sup>3</sup> Archambault E. (2002), Le bénévolat en France et en Europe, Rapport de l'Unité mixte de recherche CNRS/Université Paris I, n°8595.

<sup>4</sup> Bazin C., Duros M. et Malet J. (2006), Le baromètre du bénévolat, Rapport édité par France Bénévolat

nuisance by those involved. This is probably the reason why, after the changes in 1989, the culture of volunteering established itself more slowly in these countries, the collective memory holding on to former, so-called voluntary, displays. In addition, low thresholds of median-income turned the population towards second-income generating activities and away from volunteering.

However, in the context of a stabilised economy, deepened relationships with developed countries, efforts to diversify and enhance volunteer activities, to promote and boost the image of volunteer work, as well as the emergence and development of organizations promoting volunteering, paved the way to a growing interest for this kind of activities.

Overall, however, there is a decrease in the number of volunteers, as well as the issue of volunteer teams aging, which raises the question of renewal of volunteers, along with an increase in the number of organizations operating solely on the work of volunteers, rendering them vulnerable under the aspect of sustainability.

A study conducted in Belgium in 2007 highlighted that for both volunteers and non-volunteers, volunteering holds a series of virtues and shortcomings. It was associated with values such as: commitment, solidarity, availability, altruism, self-sacrifice, but also with non-values as: amateurism, lack of transparency, exploitation, naïveté<sup>5</sup>. In order to encourage volunteer participation, one must target these negative values that hinder potential commitment in volunteering<sup>6</sup>.

In his endeavour to identify volunteer motives, Pascal Dreyer (2006)<sup>7</sup> conceptualised two major groups of motivation: the first centres on self-centredness, defined as self-interest and personal wellbeing, while the second focuses on altruism, defined as interest for others, for the public space. The first group includes motives as: meeting people with similar interests, making friends, spending leisure time, learning and practising sports and cultural activities, gaining access to information or services of a specific nature, developing or practising skills, getting a job more easily, even in the organization where he or she previously served as a volunteer. The second group accounts for reasons such as: being useful to society, doing something for others, standing up for a cause, furthering the protection of his/her own rights and others people's, protecting children's interests. Often these motivations intertwine and are present in the same person.

Some studies<sup>8</sup> have made up a volunteer profile. Thus, a typical volunteer is a highly educated person, between the ages of 35 and 55, in good health, with time off following the children's departure from home, a practising believer, raised in a family with many children and having a family history of volunteering.

#### College students and volunteering

##### a). *Opinions about volunteering expressed by students from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences*

Our study aimed to identify the knowledge, opinions and attitudes towards volunteering among students from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, applying to this effect a 5-item questionnaire:

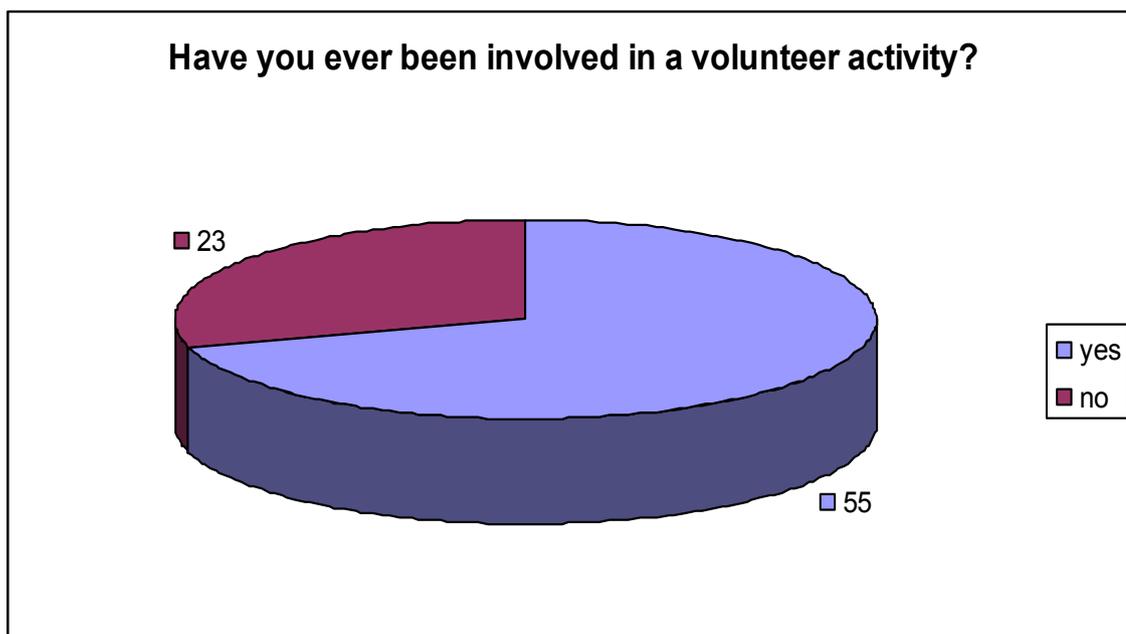
- Have you ever been involved in a volunteer activity?
- What is volunteering?
- What is your opinion on volunteers?
- What are the advantages of volunteer work?
- What do you make of the shortcomings in volunteering?

<sup>5</sup> Les Belges et le Bénévolat, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Malet (2005), La France bénévole, Publication du Centre d'Etude et de Recherche sur la Philanthropie et Dreyer, (2006), Etre bénévole aujourd'hui, Editions Marabout

<sup>7</sup> Dreyer, (2006), op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Malet (2005), op.cit.



*Graph no. 1. Student involvement in volunteer activities*

If more than half of the students responded affirmatively to an involvement in volunteer activities, it is because there is an interest among the faculty members in the growing familiarity and involvement of students in such activities, and on the other hand, because the university curriculum has been enriched with a course on volunteering, implying several practical activities as well. And this, in spite of a volunteer culture less valued worldwide, not because people are more selfish, but because they'd rather commit to volunteering if they feel an internal need for it, not at the advice of religious, political and non-political organizations or of political and religious ideologies.

Asked to define volunteering, most of the students recalled the content and importance of such activities (54 persons) and only 24 tried to capture its characteristics: unpaid activity, optional, voluntary.

On the item concerning their opinion on volunteers, responses centre on the idea of appreciation for volunteer work, being more likely a reflection of the volunteering course than a personal input of the students who seemed to model their responses according to what they believed to be expected of them, rather than express their real thoughts on the matter. We assume this relying on the research accounting for both strengths and weaknesses such as: in many fields of activity, volunteering is undervalued, even criticized based on the lack of professionalism and competence of volunteers, which might be detrimental for the institution or even cause tension between employees and volunteers; there is suspicion surrounding certain institutions on matters such as activity, use of funds, legitimacy etc, determined by a lack of transparency and an inability to disclose to the public information on activities, objectives and outcomes<sup>9</sup>.

In the students' opinion, the most important three advantages of volunteering are:

- first: gaining experience and knowledge, developing interpersonal relationships, a better knowledge of institutions
- second: experience, interpersonal relationships, developing skills, team work
- third: skills, support, experience.

Even if only sporadically, there are responses such as: personal satisfaction, the possibility to help others, to be of service to less privileged people, a different outlook on

<sup>9</sup> Salomon L et Sokolowski W. (2001), Volunteering in Cross-National Perspective: Evidence from 24 countries, Working Papers of the John Hopkins Comparative Non Profit Sector Project, Baltimore, John Hopkins University

life, developing the ability to adjust, social gain, noble work, such answers point to a variety of intuitive or perhaps experienced aspects of volunteering.

These advantages can easily turn into disadvantages for volunteer organizations, since many volunteers, especially young ones, motivated by the prospects of a job and of gaining experience, quit or give up on volunteering altogether, when they find a job<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, concerning shortcoming, the responses are as follows:

- first: the lack of material and financial resources, the small number of volunteers
- second: the lack of appreciation by the community, the lack of experience, the carelessness of volunteers.

There are also some sporadic, yet extremely interesting examples in relation to shortcomings: lack of supervision, lack of well-established programs facilitating communication between staff and volunteers, a deficient management, lacking time, the undefined status of the volunteer, stress, the reluctance of organization towards volunteers. Without a doubt, in a social-economic setting marked by crises, tension and uncertainty, time is a rare resource for all family members, parents being involved in professional activities, elders being responsible of household chores, so that the number of persons and the amount of time assigned for volunteer activities are lower.

Volunteering is also in a fierce competition in our contemporary society with multiple and diverse possibilities of employment and leisure. Even the large number of associations and organizations that rely completely or partially on the work of volunteers, generates a competitions not always beneficial, given the difficulty in recruiting certain types of human resources, along with the gradual loss of "traditional volunteers", for instance women involved in acts of charity<sup>11</sup>, following the almost exclusive focus and appreciation for skills and outcomes. Other shortcomings impeding on volunteering are mistaking volunteering for a form of exploitation or a tedious activity, failure to understand the utility and purpose of volunteer work, a greater concern for studies among the youth, lack of promotion and support from the state, central and local establishments.

#### b). The involvement of Social Work students in volunteer work

Lately, the central focus has been on the benefits of volunteer work for participants. An encouraging aspect in this regard is a growing interest among students in volunteering, with remarkable outcomes. Organizations that effectively involve student volunteers in their activities recognize the special contribution made by these students who are passionate, energetic, enthusiastic and diligent in their work, also supporting the work of employees.

During the year of university 2008-2009, a number of 18 (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year) Social Work students took part in volunteer activities in the following institutions partners with the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, department of Sociology and Social Work:

- The Social Community Administration of Oradea – The Joint Centre for Volunteering
- The Romanian Foundation for Children, Community and Family
- Ruhama Foundation
- People to People Foundation
- The Caritas Catolica Association
- The Emanuel Hospice Foundation
- SOS Autism Association Bihor
- Society for Multiple Sclerosis in Romania

Students were involved in the activity of the aforementioned institutions, working in collaboration with the social worker in order to organize different events (e.g. Volunteer

<sup>10</sup> European Volunteer Centre (2005), Le bénévolat en Europe et au niveau européen – réalités et défis dans l'Union des 25

<sup>11</sup> Dreyer, 2006, op.cit., p. 19

Caravan, festivities etc), to carry out leisure activities for children beneficiaries of the services, to solve administrative problems, fund raising campaigns, etc.

Our students participated as well in volunteer activities within the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, being involved as organizers in the National Conference with International Participation "Education and social change" and helping to organize different other activities: events during the holidays (fund raising for disadvantaged groups, distributing food and hygiene products), the Social Work Circle etc.

Professors were as well involved in the activities of partner institutions and organizations and in organizing the Social Work Circle.

During the year of university 2009-2010, a number of 50 (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year) Social Work students took part in volunteer activities in the following institutions partners with the

### OUTCOMES

As a result of activities carried out during the two years of volunteer work, one of our students was nominated by the host institution of Volunteer in 2009, her activity being described in the newsletter "Portrait of a Volunteer" edited by Pro Vobis – The National Volunteer Centre – link (19 May 2010... the Pro Vobis newsletter – National Centre for Volunteer Resources, Dec. 2... PORTRAIT OF A VOLUNTEER 2010 54 ..issuu.com/pro\_vobis/.../portret\_voluntar2009 –p.3).

Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, department of Sociology and Social Work:

- The Social Community Administration of Oradea – The Joint Centre for Volunteering
- The Romanian Foundation for Children, Community and Family
- Ruhama Foundation
- People to People Foundation
- The Caritas Catolica Association
- The Emanuel Hospice Foundation
- SOS Autism Association Bihor
- Society for Multiple Sclerosis in Romania
- Multiple Sclerosis Foundation
- Association for the Mentally Disabled

Students were involved in the activity of the aforementioned institutions, working in collaboration with the social worker in order to organize different events (e.g. conferences, festivities etc), to carry out leisure activities for children beneficiaries of the services, to solve administrative problems, fund raising campaigns, etc.

Our students participated as well in volunteer activities within the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, being involved as organizers in the National Conference with International Participation "Research and Social Policies" and helping to organize different other activities: events during the holidays (fund raising for disadvantaged groups, distributing food and hygiene products), the Social Work Circle etc.

Professors were as well involved in the activities of partner institutions and organizations and in organizing the Social Work Circle.

### OUTCOMES

Note: a number of 6, 3r year Social Work students attending the optional course called "Volunteering in Social Work" wrote a financing proposal for activities to be carried out during the "National Week of Volunteering". The project received funding from the Safir Humanitarian Association in Oradea.

### Activities in the project "Get involved in community life!" - period 21.04.-24.04.2010

The project lasted a period of three days (21.04.-24.04.2010) during the "National Week of Volunteering".

Under the guidance of two professors, 43 Social Work students from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences participated in the project.

\*Most of the students were involved in two or even three project activities.

Objectives and activities:

*Objective no. 1:*

Informing members of the community about the possibility of volunteer work during the week devoted to volunteering.

Main project activities:

a). flyer distribution (received from the Joint Centre for Volunteering) to students and other community members;

b). promoting volunteering options by 1st and 2nd year Social Work and Sociology volunteer students.

23 students were involved in activities a, b. They distributed flyers and advocated for volunteer work to their fellow students and other community members interested in the matter. The activities took place on the 22 April in the building assigned to the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences and on the Republicii str. 200 flyers were distributed and 15 posters were displayed. Informative materials were provided by the Joint Centre for Volunteering of the Social Community Administration of Oradea and the Pro Vobis National Volunteer Centre in Cluj-Napoca.

*Objective no. 2:*

Raising public awareness regarding the importance of reading during the week devoted to volunteering.

a). launching a call for reading by volunteer students to passers-by, on the Republicii str.;

b). handing out books to passers-by participating in the organized event.

26 students were involved in activities a, b. 86 books were purchased (13 copies of Maitreyi by Mircea Eliade, 4 copies of The Old Court Libertines by Mateiu Caragiale, 7 copies of Marriage in heaven by Mircea Eliade, 12 copies of The last night of love, the first night of war by Camil Petrescu, 10 copies of The novel of a near-sighted teenager by Mircea Eliade, 12 copies of Lead by Mircea Bacovia, 4 copies of Waltz invitation by Mihail Drumes, 13 copies of The mill of good fortune by Ioan Slavici, 11 copies of Otilia's secret by George Calinescu) from the publishing house Intact SRL. These were given to people who joined the action aimed to promote reading in the course of two days (22.04.2010- 23.04.2010, in the timeframe between 1 and 4 p.m.).

\*Persons willing to participate were asked to record in writing what reading meant to them.



*Objective no. 3:*

Integration for a day in community life of children with disabilities during the week of volunteering.

a). accompanying children of the special class from the no. 52 Kindergarten to see a play at the Arcadia Theatre;

b). organizing games with the six children of the special class by 3<sup>rd</sup> year Social Work students;

c). accompanying the children to a pastry shop and serving a dessert.

6 children accompanied by 3 teachers and 7 volunteer students watched the play

"The Little Golden Key" at the Arcadia Theatre in April 21, during 10.30-11.30.

After the show, the children alongside the students and teachers had the possibility to play for 2 hours in the Park 1 December.

*Objective no. 4:*

Providing an example of active citizenship and responsibility towards the city's natural resources by the students of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, in the week devoted to volunteering.

a). setting up a green patch in Oradea

32 students took part at the two activities under the objective no. 3 on the course of two days (21.04-22.04, timeframe 12 to 4 p.m.). One of the project activities implied cleaning up the University street (collecting garbage). The second one aimed at setting up a green patch in the courtyard of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences (cutting the grass, removing stones, digging and levelling the ground and planting 4 trees and lots of flowers).

During the year of university 2010-2011, a number of 50 (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year) Social Work students participated in volunteer activities in the following institutions partners with the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, department of Sociology and Social Work:

- The Social Community Administration of Oradea – The Joint Centre for Volunteering
- The Romanian Foundation for Children, Community and Family
- Ruhama Foundation
- People to People Foundation
- The Caritas Catolica Association
- The Emanuel Hospice Foundation

- SOS Autism Association Bihor
- Society for Multiple Sclerosis in Romania
- Association for the Mentally Disabled
- Association for the Locomotor Deficient

Students were involved in the activity of the aforementioned institutions, working in collaboration with the social worker in order to organize different events (e.g. conferences, festivities etc), to carry out leisure activities for children beneficiaries of the services, to solve administrative problems, fund raising campaigns, etc.

Our students participated as well in volunteer activities within the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences and Partium University, being involved as organizers in the National Conference with International Participation "European, National and Regional Identity" and helping to organize different other activities: events during the holidays (fund raising for disadvantaged groups, distributing food and hygiene products), the Social Work Circle etc.

Professors were as well involved in the activities of partner institutions and organizations and in organizing the Social Work Circle.

### OUTCOMES

Note: 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Social Work students attending the optional course of "Volunteering in Social Work" carried out a series of activities in the Program "Volunteering in 2010".

#### Activities in the program "Volunteering in 2010" – period october-december 2010

Under the guidance of a professor, a number of 50 Social Work students from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences were involved in the program.

Program activities were as follows:

- leisure activities for looked after children from the Family-type home for children "Primavara" Bratca (under the supervision of the General Department for Social Work and Child Protection – DGASPC Bihor) – for a day, the students played hosts to children, who spent a day in Oradea (University, Children's Town, the Zoo etc); the students covered the cost of transportation, lunch and packages for the children;

- the "Landfill" activity – students provided a number of 30 families with packages consisting of food and hygiene products;

- the performance of children from the Family-type home for children "Casa minunata" (DGASPC) – the students prepared the children for the festive Christmas program organized at the Arcadia Theatre;

- The International Day of Volunteering – over 100 persons signed up for the event: faculty members, representatives of partner institutions and of the financing agency (for the activities organized in the year 2009-2010), volunteer students and fellow students.

#### Conclusions and discussion

In Romania and in other former socialist countries volunteer traditions, cut short by their substitute called "patriotic labour", have led to a much needed reconstruction of the volunteer culture. This represents one of the differences between our national approach of volunteer work and that of developed countries where potential volunteers can make such a commitment freely, not necessarily at the advice of religious, political and non-political organizations.

A source of knowledge and value base for the promotion of volunteering is the school, and students in humanistic faculties who benefit from an adequate curriculum in this respect, could become themselves channels for the promotion of volunteer work among the youth.

Reviewing the shortcomings facing volunteers and volunteer organizations and, comparing them to the benefits, far more numerous, as well as demystifying volunteer work, eliminating prejudice, mentalities and negative values associated with volunteering, we

believe to be key actions, resulting in a growing number of people to become involved in volunteer work and in a public image boost of this activity in the coming years.

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