

# Do We Volunteer? An Exploratory University Community Service Survey

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There has been renewed interest on many college and university campuses across the country in encouraging students to incorporate community service or volunteer activities into their total learning experience. Sometimes this takes the form of university-sponsored internship programs or community service requirements for graduation; often students are urged to participate as volunteers through specific extracurricular activities or organizations sponsored by the school. In part, this renewed concern for student involvement seems to be a response to the belief that young Americans are not particularly interested in contributing to the welfare of others or to the community and that universities have not, in the last decade, sufficiently emphasized the importance of knowledgeable and active citizenship as one of the roles an educated person must undertake in a vital democratic society.

As new student community or public service requirements have developed and organizations like the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE) and Campus Compact have emerged as leaders in promoting experiential education and community service in the university, it has been suggested that faculty and administrators should become more involved as volunteers and that they should serve as role models through their own community activities. In an effort to determine the extent of that involvement, in March 1988, Presidents Donald Kennedy of Stanford and David Warren of Ohio Wesleyan called for a survey of the faculty role at Campus Compact institutions in public service initiatives.

Responding to this request, a study was undertaken at Metropolitan State University, St. Paul–Minneapolis, Minnesota, to determine the extent of volunteer involvement, not only of faculty but of students, staff and administrators. The university, an upper division two-year institution with a full-time enrollment of 2,030 in 1988, primarily serves adults who are working during the day and completing the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Arts in Nursing degrees at night. The average age of Metro State students is 35. Sixty-one percent of the students are women.

Since its inception, this community-based, nontraditional education university has included, as one of the five areas to be completed for graduation, a civic or community category. Students may elect to register for community service internships, take courses or independent studies in community-related topics, or gain credit for previous public leadership or significant volunteer experience. Furthermore, resident faculty are expected to engage in some form of community service. Each resident faculty member also oversees an average of thirteen community, or adjunct faculty. These faculty members, practitioners in their own fields during the day, teach the bulk of Metro State's evening classes.

Because of the university's emphasis on community or civic competence and involvement, and because the average age of the students is older than the traditional student population, one premise of the study was that all of the groups would already be actively engaged in a variety of community endeavors. A 1987

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Gallup Survey, commissioned by Independent Sector ("Giving and Volunteering in the United States"), found that almost half of all Americans (45%) volunteered an average of 4.7 hours per week. The idea behind the university study was that each Metro State group, because of the institution's emphasis on civic involvement and the older age of the student population, would report a similar number of hours spent weekly on volunteer activities. This hypothesis, and the belief that older students, already living in communities, might be more actively involved as volunteers, was not borne out in the study.

### THE STUDY—METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

A community service survey was designed by the author and Ed Mack, Director of Institutional Research, to be distributed in November, 1988, to all university administrators (10), resident faculty (41), community faculty (594) and university staff (90). In addition, the same survey went to a random sample of students (492 or one out of every seven) enrolled during fall quarter, 1988, in the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Arts in Nursing programs. Ten days before the surveys were mailed, all participants received a letter from the university president telling them that the survey was coming and asking for their participation. The color-coded survey was accompanied by a cover letter from the writer describing the purpose and importance of the survey. Postcard reminders to send in the survey were sent one week later.

Participants were asked to identify their gender and primary affiliation to the university (student, community faculty member, resident faculty, staff or administrator). Then, each was asked to check the volunteer activities in which he/she had been an active participant in the last two years. Under each of the 14 volunteer categories, respondents were asked to list the names of the organizations in which they had actively participated. The categories were: arts organizations or events; business or professional organizations; political organizations and campaigns (answer, optional); civic associations (ex-

ample: neighborhood organizations, Jaycees); education organizations (example: PTA, adult education committees); environmental organizations; health care/hospitals; libraries; minority organizations; religious organizations; women's organizations; and youth service organizations.

Participants were also allowed to list other activities that did not fall into any of the previous categories and then asked to check the average number of hours per week that they had spent volunteering during the last two years. Finally, in an open-ended question, they were asked about the outcomes of their volunteer experience. They were to describe what they had learned or gained as a result of their participation. In addition, they were asked if they would or would not like to work on a group community service project sponsored by the university and were able to check or write down a specific group activity they would choose.

The major limitation of the study was that none of the five groups surveyed reported back in large enough numbers to cite this as a significant account. Only 60% of the administrators, 31% of the resident faculty, 23% of the community faculty, 29% of the staff and 26% of the student sample was turned in. Nevertheless, the responses from all groups yielded new and useful information, particularly in light of the school's adult population and emphasis on civic competence.

In the next sections, the findings for each of the groups are summarized.

### ADMINISTRATORS

Of the ten university administrators, six (60%), returned their surveys. Three men and three women responded. They reported that they averaged three hours a week on volunteer activities and that they were engaged in an average of 3.5 activities. Thirty-seven different organizations or activities were listed among them with business and professional organizations, political organizations and campaigns, and civic groups receiving the highest tally. Men's and women's responses were evenly divided between these three categories. They were actively involved as volunteers in professional

organizations that complemented their work roles such as the Minnesota Association of Nurses, and civic organizations such as the United Way, neighborhood associations, and a citizen cable television group. All indicated an interest in a university-wide volunteer project. Each gave different answers when asked about the outcomes of their volunteer experience. They reported that they gained a better understanding of the world and the needs of society, felt they could make a difference in the world, valued the networks that were formed as a result of their involvement, felt better about themselves because of their activity, made new friends and gained more information and skills.

### RESIDENT FACULTY

Thirteen out of forty-one faculty in residence during fall quarter (31%) reported on their civic involvement. Seven females and six males answered the questionnaire. They were engaged in an average of 4.5 activities and spent an average of 2.8 hours a week as volunteers. The majority of their activities were clustered in business or professional organizations (8), education organizations (8), and religious organizations (6). Men and women were evenly divided in the three categories. Types of business or professional organizations included: The Minnesota Association for Continuing Adult Education, the National Academic Advising Association, Minnesota Women in Higher Education, U.S. Olympic Committee, International Forum, Industrial Relations Alumni Society and the Minnesota Oral History Association.

In education, faculty were active volunteers in the Minnesota Education Association, PTAs, school volunteers, Minnesota Council for Gifted and Talented Students, a school district's long-range planning committee and the American Society of Composers, Artists and Publishers. Religious organizations profited from their involvement as Sunday School teachers or leaders (3), church board members (2), and as choir director and an adult education chair. One faculty member served on a church's shelter board.

Resident faculty reported that they gained an increased awareness of, and sensitivity to others and a greater appreciation of differences as a result of their volunteer experiences. In addition, they cited increased knowledge and skills as another benefit of their participation. A student-staff-faculty volunteer project sponsored by the university interested 11 of the 13 respondents.

### COMMUNITY FACULTY

Community faculty at Metropolitan State are employed as counselors, art historians or artists, accountants, professional managers and a variety of other work roles during the day. By night, in the classroom, they share their expertise with the university's adult students. Of the 594 community faculty at Metro in 1988, 138 (23%) reported on their volunteer experience. There were 79 female respondents, 44 were male and five did not report gender. They averaged 3.3 hours a week on volunteer activities and were engaged in an average of 6.7 endeavors.

Community faculty listed activities in all of the 14 categories but the greatest number were involved in business or professional organizations (80), education organizations (68), and religious organizations (65). Again, given the percentage of female/male representation, they were about equally divided in each category. Following these areas were: political organizations (49), arts organizations (44), national and international organizations (23), youth service (21), minority organizations (18), museums (18), and libraries (7). However, this group reported more volunteer work that fell outside the categories in the questionnaire than any other group responding. Community faculty members provided *pro bono* legal assistance, worked with the homeless or economically displaced, and worked with special populations such as the elderly, refugees and prisoners.

Perhaps because of their involvement in so many volunteer activities, 73 community faculty members said that they would not be interested in working on a university public service project. How-

ever, they understood clearly what they had gained from their volunteer participation. In the open-ended question, eight reported that they had gained a better understanding of and respect for others. Six said that they had learned more about their community and six also reported great personal satisfaction because of their efforts. Finally, three each reported that they gained leadership skills, a better understanding of specific issues or problems, and new friends as a result of their experience.

### STAFF

For purposes of this study, staff at the university included all admissions and financial aid personnel, staff advisors to students, business office personnel and support staff. Of the 90 possible respondents, 26 (29%) answered the surveys, 21 females and five males. Of this group, seven reported no voluntary activity at all and the remainder were engaged in an average of 3.5 activities at which they spend 2.5 hours weekly. In this group, the greatest number of participants (9) were involved with religious organizations. Members were active in church women's groups, committee work and lay ministry. In the next largest category, seven staff were involved in business or professional organizations such as the American Society for Training and Development and the Minnesota College Personnel Association. Finally, six staff were volunteers in women's organizations ranging from the Minnesota Women's Consortium to a women's community housing project. This was the second highest category in the women's group.

Of the staff, 11 said they were not interested in seeking an all-university volunteer opportunity; even so, there were 25 positive responses to the question on specific university community service projects they would choose for action.

### STUDENTS

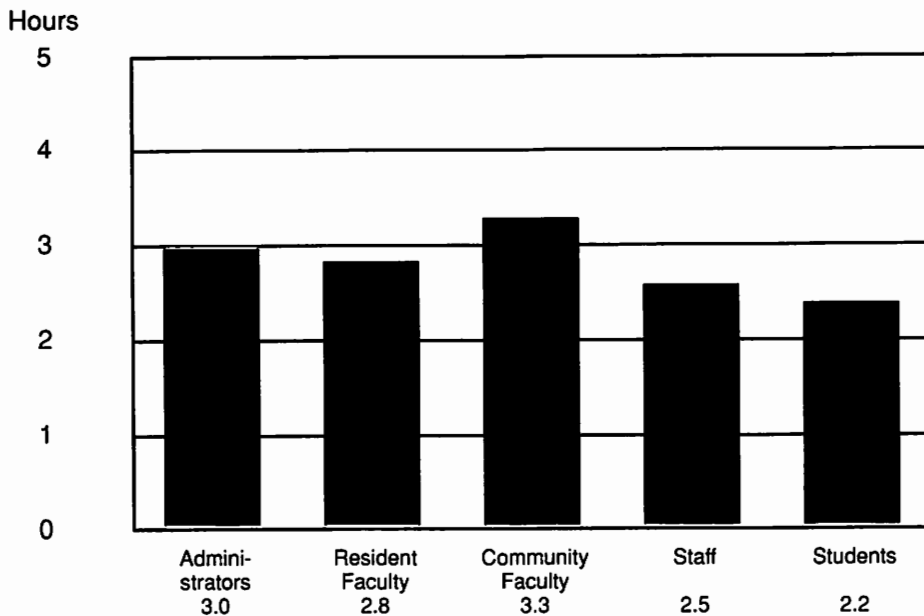
Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 492 students or one out of every seven students enrolled for at least one course in the undergraduate program during fall quarter 1988. There

were 130 responses (26%) to the questionnaire. Seventy-seven females and 50 males answered the questions; three did not respond to the question on gender.

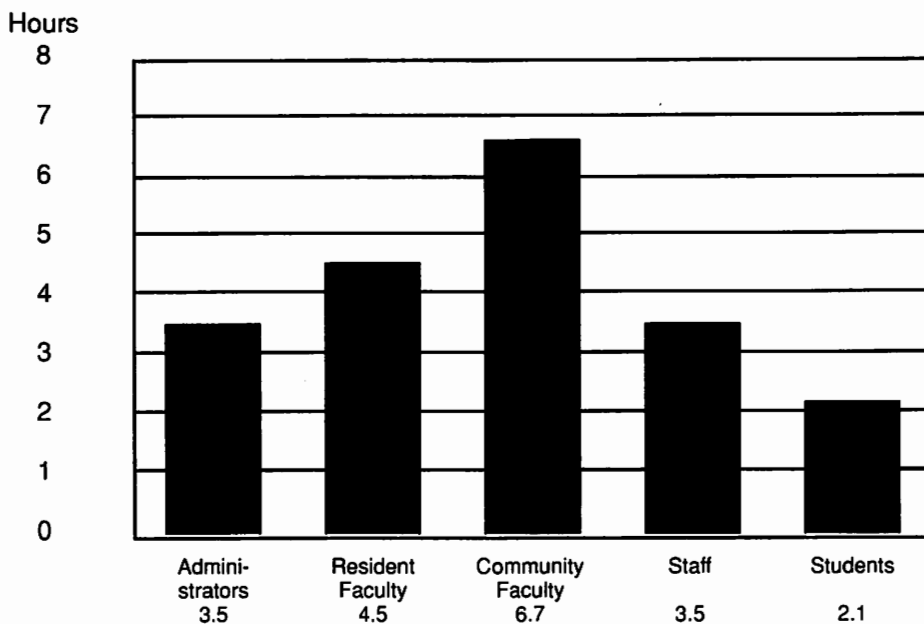
Perhaps because of crowded schedules (work, school, family responsibilities), this group recorded the lowest average number of volunteer hours per week (2.2) and the lowest average number of activities—2.1 per student. The greatest number of students were involved in religious organizations (56) and the majority of these participants (29) were women. Respondents took on many of the volunteer roles faculty and staff assumed in the same organizations, serving as elders or church board members, Sunday School and youth leaders and in lay ministry responsibilities. The second highest category was business or professional organizations. Fifteen women and 11 men reported a total of 43 different activities in this area. These included groups such as Chambers of Commerce, the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, Professional Secretaries International, Toastmasters and various company organizations.

The third area of interest was education. Here women were more predominant than men; 11 females and five males reported 35 activities. Most were active in PTAs or as school volunteers. Nine tutored or served as volunteer teachers or on community education or advisory committees for their schools or districts. Slightly over 50% (61) of the students said that they were not interested in participating in a university community service project. Several added unsolicited and apologetic notes to their surveys saying that they simply didn't have time to volunteer while in school but would get back to it after graduation.

Nevertheless, there was a strong response to the open-ended question on outcomes of their volunteer experience. Twenty-two students reported greater feelings of personal or self-worth as a result of their activity. Sixteen wrote that they had gained new skills and knowledge. Thirteen felt respected for their volunteer time and effort and 10 said that their communications skills improved as a result of volunteering.



**Figure 1**  
**Volunteer Hours per Week over Last Two Years**



**Figure 2**  
**Average Number of Activities over Last Two Years**

## CONCLUSIONS

While the results of this exploratory study cannot be counted as statistically significant, some interesting information has been obtained which will be useful to the institution and to other colleges and universities wishing to determine and

encourage the extent and type of active and experiential volunteer or community involvement of their students and staff. Of the respondents in this study, no group volunteered as many as the 4.7 hours averaged by those who responded to the 1987 Gallup Survey. Administra-

tors and the two groups of faculty at Metropolitan State averaged about three hours weekly and students and staff averaged about 2.4 hours. The greatest number of volunteer activities for all groups were clustered in three categories: business and professional, educational, and religious organizations. Because a significant number of those surveyed in every category did not respond, one could surmise that a large number of administrators, faculty, staff and students are not particularly involved in community activity and simply did not wish to acknowledge this on the questionnaire. The length of the survey may also have been a deterrent. Nevertheless, large numbers of respondents in every category—even those who reported little or no volunteer community activity—were interested in undertaking an all-university project. In all groups, the greatest numbers said that they would like to participate in service activities with the state literacy council or would volunteer if the university adopted a local public school or schools. Food shelf and holiday help was also high on individuals' lists. The university has also responded by re-emphasizing the community service aspect of the Bachelor of Arts program. With the aid of two year Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grants, a community service internship program has been revitalized and the number of students registered for internships has risen from approximately 100 to 300 yearly.

Colleges and universities can and indeed have an obligation to do more to

encourage students and staff to become actively involved in community endeavors. By sponsoring projects such as tutoring, work in the schools, or help at a local food shelf or co-op, individuals learn first-hand about some of the major issues confronting citizens. Students leaving institutions must continue to work on the problems society faces. In this study, adult students, perhaps because of the multiple roles they juggle while attending the university, were not as actively involved as the adults responding to the Gallup Survey. One way to encourage them (and other younger students as well) to participate as part of the college experience is to give credit for their involvement. A community service requirement for graduation, for example, gives some indication of the university's commitment to educating for citizenship. Civic learning for credit may take the form of internships or may involve taking coursework that allows the student to move between the classroom and the community. Both types of opportunities are excellent ways to better integrate older students (now numbering about 40% on most campuses) into the life and purpose of the college or university in ways that have direct meaning for them.

As a follow-up to this survey, it would be interesting if other institutions would undertake similar studies to learn more about the extent of student and staff involvement at other types of schools. Furthermore, the studies might serve as catalysts in encouraging experiential education and volunteer involvement in the university community.