

# Building Career Pathways into the Student Volunteer Experience



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# INTRODUCTION

## The state of student volunteering

Colleges and university campuses have always been a hotbed of volunteerism. Whether mandated by curriculums, as a way of driving important social connections or a mixture of both, volunteering is a way of life for students.

In order to characterize the volunteering habits of US students, context is key. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's annual World Giving Index, most recently conducted in 2018, the United States ranks as the fourth most-generous nation, behind Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand. Some 39% of those surveyed had volunteered their time to a cause. According to the US Corporation for National and Community Service, this equates to some 77.4 million Americans contributing 6.9 bil-

lion hours annually to charitable causes – generating an economic impact of US \$167 billion.

Of those 77-plus million volunteers, almost one in five assist in educational or youth services programs, according to the same research, making it the third most-common form of volunteering, behind religious

and sport, cultural and arts. This most commonly equates to tutoring or teaching, with 23% of volunteers saying they donate their time in this way. However, this only scratches the surface of the student volunteering phenomena, as the volunteering experience of many students touch on a host of categories and causes – from health, public safety and civic to political, sporting or environmental.

However, the flipside of this is that research consistently shows that those in the college-aged demographic bracket are less engaged than many other generations when it comes to volunteering. The American Bureau of Labor Statistics has found that volunteer rates are lowest among those aged 20 to 24, dropping more than 7



# 35%

Share of Americans who are college graduates

percentage points from the age of 16-19, immediately preceding college. This drastic drop-off in volunteering reflects a number of realities of the youth experience – more economic freedom, more time pressure and more competing interests all contribute to college-age students.



**286**

**Million**  
hours of service

Yet in spite of so many competing interests, college students are far more likely to volunteer than those who don't attend college, and still chalk up impressive hours doing so. Some 25.7% of college students volunteer on a regular or semi-regular basis, equating to three million volunteers and a median of 34 hours of service per-year, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service. This output equals 286 million hours of service, contributing the equivalent of US \$6.7 billion to the economy.

Just as vitally is the legacy of student volunteerism on graduates

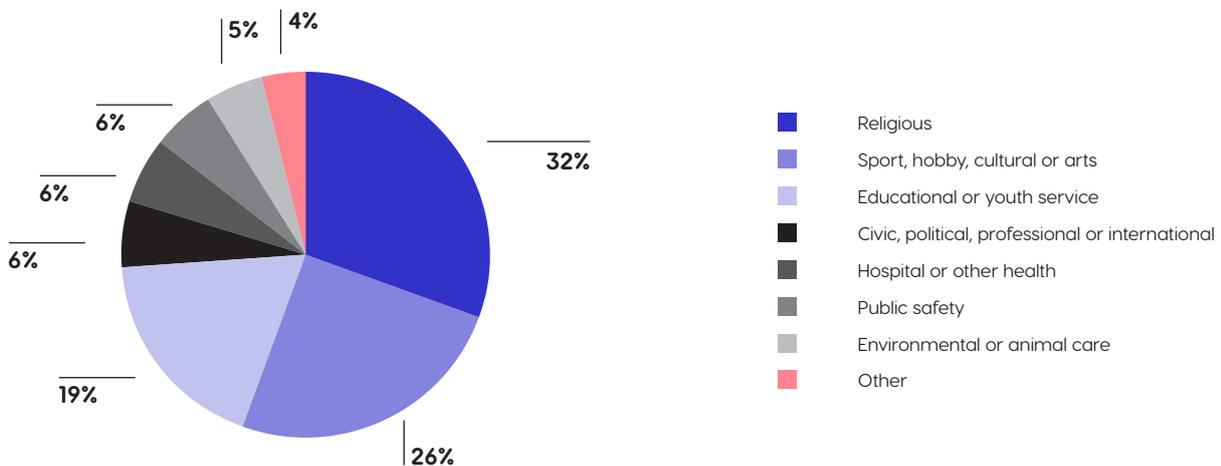
later in life. Research from the Bureau of Labor demonstrates that adults with some college experience, either an associate degree, bachelor's degree or higher, are four times more likely to volunteer than high school graduates who didn't attend college. Indeed, 28 million Americans with bachelor degrees or higher volunteered in 2015 – more than all other American volunteers combined. These statistics speak to a lasting impact of the service-minded outlook fostered by universities.

While the numbers and economic impact of student volun-

teers are steady, the nature of student volunteering is changing rapidly – most notably, the ongoing shift from a Millennial generation to Generation Z is having huge implications for the way students volunteer, and how American colleges and universities engage them.

In this whitepaper those generational differences, and what it means for student volunteerism, will be explored at length. We speak to leaders in colleges across the US – Wheaton College in Illinois, Ohio University and Colorado State University – to get the inside view on the current state of student engagement and the impact that various internal and external factors are having. We will also explore compelling new models for volunteers, the impact of technology and new resources, and how the motivations of Generation Z will reinvent student engagement.

**EDUCATION ACCOUNTS FOR ALMOST ONE IN FIVE VOLUNTEERS**



# STUDY SMARTER

## The state of student volunteering

In seeking to understand both the current challenges of the student volunteering sector and also the potential opportunities, it is crucial to understand how social and communal outlooks differ across various generations. Particularly in terms of undergraduates, Millennials (born 1981-1996) have in recent years handed the torch to Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), who now make up the majority of freshmen cohorts.

According to recent research by Ipsos Mori, Generation Z are far more engaged than their predecessors when it comes to volunteering, seeing it as a “social antidote”. Ipsos’ 2018 report on Gen Z, ‘Beyond Binary’, reports that “volunteering face-to-face in communities could be particularly important for a generation getting less and less of their social interaction through physical connections.”

**Sarah Stephens**, Senior Program Coordinator of Community Engagement at **Colorado State University’s** Student Leadership, Involvement, and Community Engagement office, says that Gen Z students are already starting to make their mark in their volunteering habits.

“We’re dealing mostly with undergraduates, which means Generation Z. They’re altruistic and community-minded, but also entrepreneurial and career-based, which is a great mix for encouraging volunteers because they’re very aware of causes and so engaged in trying to make a difference,” she says.

As more members of Gen Z finish school and enter the realm of higher education, universities and colleges need to be prepared for an influx of socially-minded students – Ipsos Mori has found that a massive 46% of Gen Z-ers are prepared to give unpaid time to help the wider community, up from 30% of Millennials. 29% have helped to organize an event or activity for charity, and the same figure have been regularly active in a community organization (up from just 10% of Millennials).

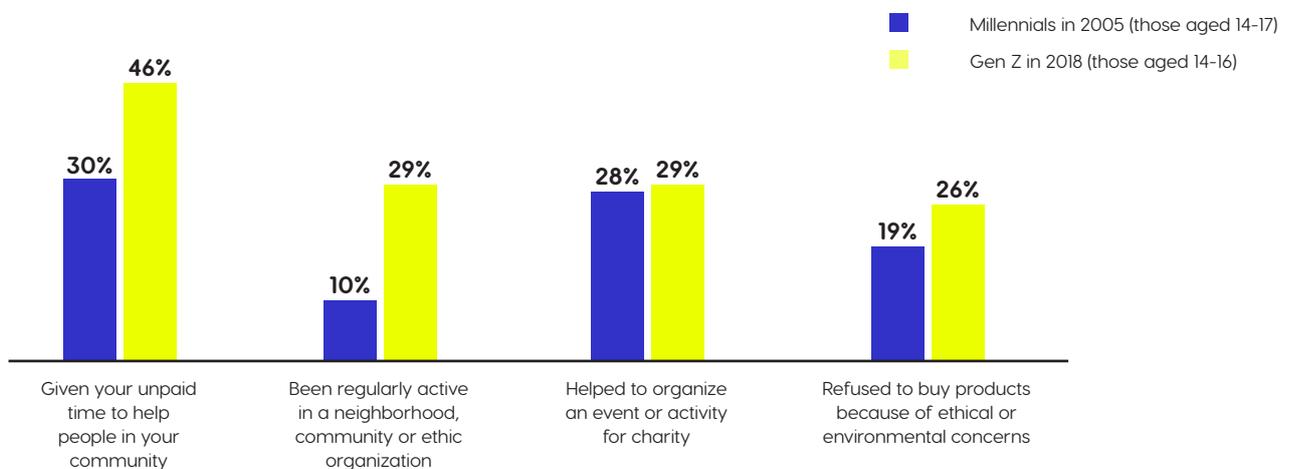


3.9

Million

Number of higher education degrees earned in 2016-2017

### GEN Z: A VOLUNTEERING REVOLUTION WAITING TO HAPPEN





This data trend is backed up by the experience of Wheaton College's Director, Office of Christian Outreach & Student Development, Yulee Lee, who oversees a robust culture of volunteering and service. Wheaton, a top liberal arts college, has had more than one-third of its 2,300 undergraduates take part in volunteering opportunities so far this year.

"We've seen an increase in the desire to volunteer year-on-year. We've historically had around 400 students per-month placed in external volunteering roles, and this year that has doubled to 800 students. Freshmen and sophomore classes especially, the younger generations, are actively seeking out opportunities to be part of something bigger than themselves," she says.

Stephens also agrees that the volunteering data is starting to tick upward as more Gen Z students enter college: "Gen Z are global-minded and want to be activists, and I think that plays a big part in why our volunteer numbers are now going up - Last spring we had 2,200 volunteers and I only had enough projects for 1,500," she says.

Yet universities are still nowhere near realising the full potential of Gen Z, according to research by the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy in 2018. The report, 'Good Intentions, Gap in Action', found that 77.5% of freshmen think that helping others in difficulty is either essential or very important - the highest percentage in the 51-year history of the survey.

That figure has risen by 11% since 2006. Yet volunteerism among college students has remained stagnant over this period in spite of this, illustrating the vast number of students who are sympathetic to voluntary causes but don't ever engage while at college, despite ample opportunities to do so.

"It's a problem that demands creative solutions," says Lee. "Finding out what motivates them is really critical - they have other things to do besides volunteer and the primary reason they're here is to learn. One of our motivation strategies is to connect our volunteer service opportunities to academia, so students can get academic credit for volunteering."

# 82%

of employers would be more likely to choose a candidate with volunteer experience on their resume

# 85%

are willing to overlook other resume flaws when a candidate includes volunteer work on a resume

# 92%

say volunteering improves an employee's broader professional skill set

# 80%

believe active volunteers move more easily into leadership roles

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**"GEN Z KIDS WANT THE 'WHY'. THEY WANT A CAUSE, THEY WANT TO BE ENGAGED AND THEY WANT TO SEE THE RESULTS OF WHAT THEY'RE DOING AND TRACK THEIR PERFORMANCE. THEY WANT THE PROOF AND THEY WANT TO BE RECOGNIZED."**

SARAH STEPHENS Senior Program Coordinator of Community Engagement, Colorado University

## THE SOUTHERN OHIO COPPERHEADS: a new model for student engagement?

Ohio University has an in-built model of student volunteerism – the unique Southern Ohio Copperheads, a Collegiate baseball team based in Athens, Ohio.

“We call it our ‘learning laboratory,’” says Annie Brackley, Ohio University College of Business’ Associate Director of Sport Career Placement. Brackley also serves as VP of Business Operations for the Copperheads, which is almost entirely-run by student volunteers from the university’s sports management program. About 60 of

the program’s 400 undergraduates are part of the team’s staff at any one time, overseeing everything from sponsorship and ticket sales to fan engagement and merchandise for at least 21 regular-season games every summer.

“The Copperheads are fully-run by students with the oversight of myself as well as community board members, who have a limited role. Business owners, professionals, university staff – all in all it’s a brilliant model and serves as a learning lab for students to understand the essentials of front-office management for a professional sports team.”

Brackley says that the team serves as an ideal model for student volunteerism, as it gives them the chance to ‘buy in’ to an organization offering relevant career training while also providing an important social service for the local community.

“Athens is one of the poorest counties in the state and there are few options for affordable entertainment in the summer – the students plan year-round but the goal is to provide a place for affordable entertainment and not raise ticket prices above \$5. But the team has its own ecosystem, we help the athletics



# 9.41

Million

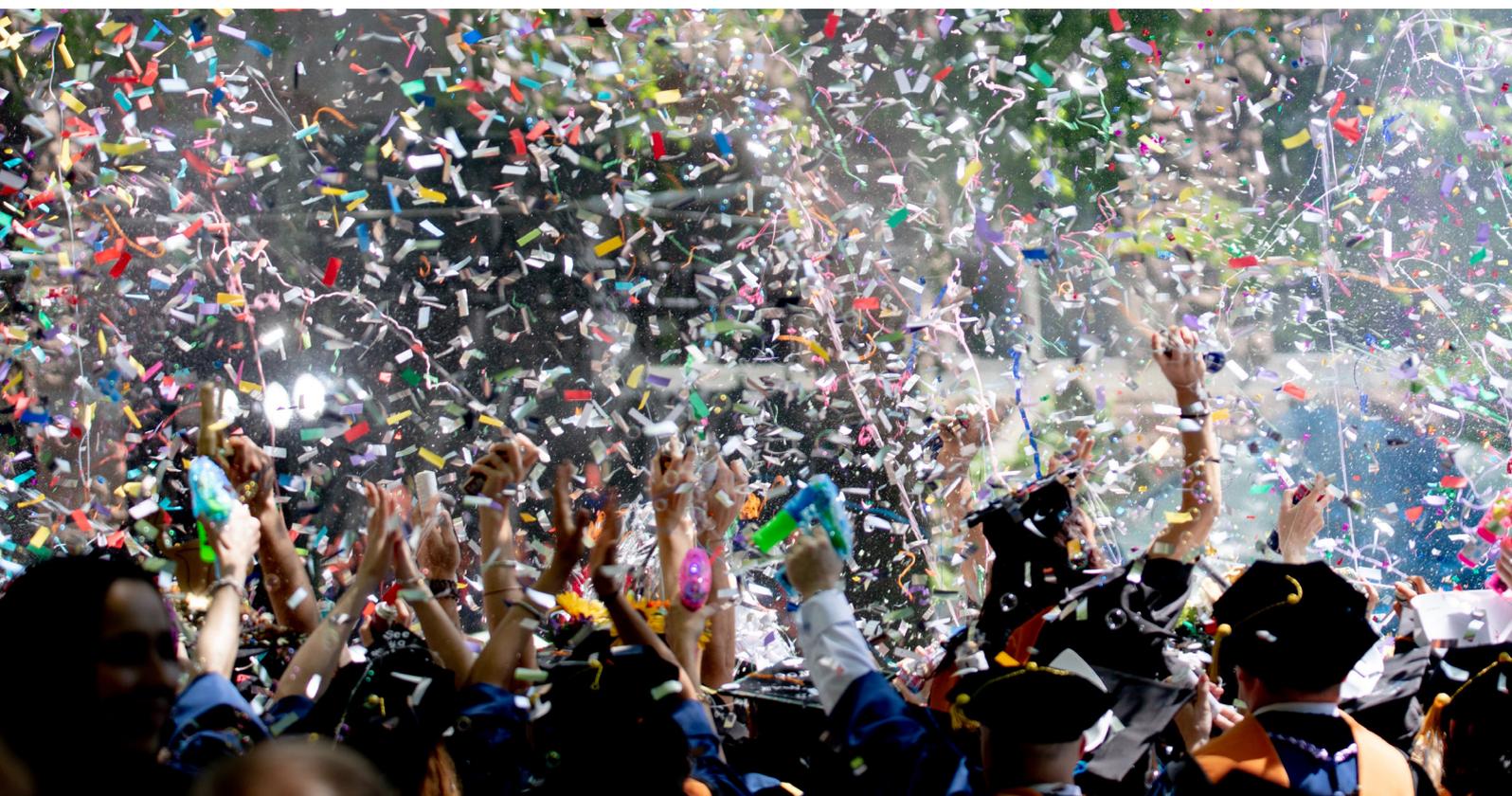
Number of female undergraduates in the U.S. in 2017



# 7.34

Million

Number of male undergraduates in the U.S. in 2017





department, local businesses sponsor us, we pay a stadium hiring fee.”

Brackley says multiple universities have been in touch about replicating the model, which works so well because volunteers have a vested interest in the operation. Volunteers play an active role in management and decision-making – and also have to deal with the consequences of poor strategy or planning.

“We’re now dealing with Gen Z and for these kids empowerment and mentorship is key. Having an open-door policy, strong communication and providing an inclusive environment empowers students - making sure they understand their impact in the organization and how they contribute to the bottom line is so important,” says Brackley.

“As a learning lab the students see and feel the impact of every decision they make. The financial viability of the organization relies on our sponsors and the students manage that, they are responsible for getting people in the stadium. It’s all about accountability, and they thrive on that.”

## ‘LEARNING LAB’

### Three tips to bolster volunteer engagement and retention from the Copperheads

#### CREDIT LOAD-BEARING

Courses at Ohio University, Brackley says, are designed to encourage volunteer experiences. Students who take on senior leadership roles with the Copperheads may be eligible for course credit, something also done with the NCAA Athletics program at the university.

#### RECREATE VOCATIONAL CONDITIONS

“If a student has an idea and wants to run a promotion they should have a business case for it – if it makes business sense we’ll do it, and knowing that they’re having an impact on the organization is really empowering for students,” says Brackley.

#### BUILD CAREER PATHWAYS INTO THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

“We work closely with the athletics department and typically those points of contact got hired because of their internship credit,” says Brackley. Copperheads alumni have gone on to secure jobs at prestigious organizations like the Cleveland Indians and San Antonio Spurs.



# THINK BIGGER

## What the future holds for campus volunteering

So, as Generation Z continues to populate universities and colleges across the States, what is the key to unlocking the enormous volunteering potential? For Stephens, the answer can be condensed down to two elements – technology and motivation.

While the term ‘digital native’ has become a cliché, it is also true – on average, 16-24 year-olds spend nearly nine hours per-day consuming media or communicating digitally, including roughly four hours of multitasking.

When combined with their increased propensity for engaging with causes, this technological connection is a major untapped opportunity. “Millennials and Generation Z’ers are very community-minded. The big difference is that Gen Z are digital natives and are way more attuned to that. They’re online, signing up for things, seeing the visibility of social issues on social media,” says Stephens.

“Because Gen Z is digitally-native, as an organization we know we need to be more technically adept when we’re communicating with them. Students are interacting with each other digitally and they are sourcing volunteer opportunities digitally, so that means we need to be on the same wavelength.”

Technology isn’t just of benefit to Gen Z students either. Centralized volunteer management platforms can free up valuable time and resources for colleges and universities, paving the way for efficiencies in departments. Stephens gives the example of CS Unity, Colorado State’s annual one-day festival that draws on roughly 2,000 volunteers but has relied on out-of-date processes, hamstringing preparations.

The benefits of centralising data for Colorado State also flow back to the students themselves. The role of a modern university, more than just being a center of learning, is about fostering an environment of innovation that equips students with modern resources and technology, and universities can’t risk being seen to implement out-of-date tech with bad user experience, says Stephens.

“CS Unity alone has about 400 different projects and running them all manually using spreadsheets was unsustainable. We did have an online system but if it has bad user experience and isn’t user-friendly – to be frank, if the interface is ugly – then those Gen Z kids don’t engage with it and give up on it,” she says.

Technology itself isn’t the answer to the question of unlocking student volunteering potential – rather it is a facilitator. The real key to this, Stephens and Brackley agree, is finding the right mix of recognition and motivation for Gen Z. To varying degrees, volunteers from all walks of life – from teenagers to retirees



– want to get something out of the volunteering experience. However, students by their nature are more likely than at

**“VOLUNTEERS NEED TO BE EMPOWERED AND NEED TO KNOW WHAT IMPACT THEY’RE HAVING ON AN ORGANIZATION – OUR STUDENTS KNOW FULL-WELL THAT IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO OPERATE OUR ATHLETICS EVENTS WITHOUT STUDENT BUY-IN, AND THEY’RE MORE ENGAGED BECAUSE OF IT.”**

**ANNIE BRACKLEY**

Associate Director of Sport Career Placement,  
Ohio University



**“IN UNIVERSITY THERE CAN OFTEN BE TENSION BETWEEN VOLUNTEERING AND INTERNSHIPS. WE FACILITATE A LOT OF WORK ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, RELATIONSHIP BUILDING... DIFFERENTIATING OURSELVES WITH THINGS YOU DON'T GET IN A CORPORATE INTERNSHIP.”**

**YULEE LEE**

Director, Office of Christian Outreach & Student Development, Wheaton College

any other stage of the volunteering journey to want tangible takeaways from their experience. From enhancing skills that will come in handy when transitioning to professional life to building relevant networks, student volunteers in particular are geared towards taking as much out of a volunteering experience as they put in.

“With Gen Z something that is very noticeable is that when they volunteer, they want to be doing something that correlates directly with a future career. If it's not worth their time and doesn't relate to career readiness or a job trajectory, they don't participate in it. Or if it's issue-based volunteering, they're emotionally driven to help because

they've been around social media their whole lives and have an understanding of those narratives,” says Stephens. Lee agrees, noting that Wheaton has retooled its volunteer experiences to better-reflect what students are seeking from a career development perspective.

Universities and colleges have never been better-positioned to help drive a new generation of socially-engaged students into meaningful volunteering opportunities. Gen Z is already committed to making positive change – the next step is putting the motivations and technology in place to capitalize on this.

## **BEST OF BOTH WORLDS: BALANCING TECH AND FACE-TO-FACE ENGAGEMENT**

While tech-enabled volunteerism is only going to become more prevalent in the coming years, Wheaton College's Lee states that it is important to bear the motivations of students in mind when training and rewarding them – something best-done in a face-to-face forum:

“Gen Z is so digitally engaged and always tuned in to social media and one of their primary reasons for volunteering is to gain that face-to-face interaction and build those networks in the real world. One of the keys for students in particular is that volunteering has a huge social element and so we try to balance digital engagement with a lot of offline training, personal interaction and relationship building,” says Wheaton's Lee.

This is echoed in Ipsos research which states that volunteering appeals to Gen Z as it “improves social connection for a generation who are screen-first.”

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