

AN EXPERIENCE SURVEY OF COLLEGE STUDENT VOLUNTEER ATTITUDES TOWARDS METHODS FOR SOCIAL CHANGES

by

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In recent years, much thought on the university campus has been directed toward campus violence and unrest. Because of its cost in dollars and cents and its devastating effect on good public relations, many administrators have sought ways to channel youthful dissent into constructive and not so costly avenues of action. One such move on some campuses is the attempt for the university to espouse voluntary action on the part of its students.

Often the establishment of an office of voluntary services or of an administrative office to advise student-run volunteer programs is effected upon the premise that students involved in volunteer activity are less likely to become involved in campus unrest. Another reason is the favorable publicity that sometimes accompanies such a move.

On the other hand, some administrators have claimed that student volunteers because of a first hand experience out in the community are more apt to become radicalized. The suggestion is that they are deeply touched by their volunteer experience and can be expected to empathize with the frustration and anxiety of the people with whom they work.

This is a report of an experience survey conducted to begin to discover the attitudes of committed volunteers toward social change and "appropriate means" for achieving it. This is only a beginning. The attitudes and values of each volunteer are as individual as their persons. But certain trends can be at least tentatively identified.

The sample for the survey included eighteen volunteers working through the Michigan State University Volunteer Bureau. The minimum amount of time engaged in volunteer programs was seven months. Several of the sample had been involved for up to three years. In a 1969-70 tally of demographic information on M. S. U. students working through the volunteer bureau, it was found that approximately two female students volunteer for every one male. The sample included twelve women and six men students. The sample was more heavily weighted with Juniors and Seniors because of the long term commitment of most of the sample. The tally included two graduate students, one recent graduate, six Seniors, eight Juniors and one Sophomore. The ages of the sample population ranged from nineteen years to twenty-two years of age. The programs represented in the sample in-

cluded Campus Community Commission, Students for Community Organization through Personal Effort (SCOPE), Emergency Service Corps (ESC), volunteers at the Boy's Training School, and volunteers at the Veteran's Administration Hospital. Each of these programs requires a minimum amount of weekly participation and commitment.

The sample population was surveyed not to present an accurate statistical picture of all volunteers (the sample is too small for that), but rather to gain useful insights into the attitudes of these volunteers who are probably some of the most committed working through the M. S. U. Volunteer Bureau.

On the survey form, the sample was asked to identify those "means" or methods for achieving social change which they thought were appropriate. The criteria for appropriateness was: "would you personally use" the method? Six different means were identified for them as choices. They are: (a) working through established channels (i.e. campaigning, canvassing, committee work, etc.), (b) taking part in peaceful demonstrations where LEGAL, (c) taking part in peaceful demonstrations even though ILLEGAL, (d) taking part in demonstrations with VIOLENCE ONLY TO PROPERTY, (e) taking part in demonstrations with VIOLENCE TOWARD PEOPLE, and (f) taking part in a revolution or revolutionary activities aimed at destruction of the existing order so that a new order may be formed.

A second sample was also asked to respond to the above portion of the survey. That sample was a completely random sample of M. S. U. students. The resulting comparison was not what one would expect. Below are those responses charted according to the number of respondents finding each choice of methods acceptable. The letters correspond to the above listing of choices.

It should be noted that one volunteer did not respond to the six choices because she "could rationalize every means listed." Only seventeen respondents are listed.

| Choice Letter | a | b | c | d | e | f |
|----------------------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------|----------|
| Volunteer Sample | 17(100%) | 16(93%) | 11(64.7%) | 2(11.76%) | 0(0%) | 4(23.5%) |
| Non-Volunteer Sample | 25(100%) | 22(88%) | 12(48.0%) | 4(16.0%) | 0(0%) | 5(20.0%) |

The interesting thing about the responses is the striking similarities in the answers of the two samples. For those who advocate volunteer activity as a means of deactivating students, their theory at least initially seems to be in error.

Through a self-report a deeper probe was made to see if the volunteer sample had altered their views on appropriate methods for social change. The volunteer sample was asked to reflect upon their volunteer

experience and determine if it had changed their views and in what direction.

Five of the sample indicated that volunteer activities did NOT change their approach to appropriate means for social change. Twelve of the respondents answered that "yes" their views had been changed by the experience. This may have been a very hard thing to perceive as was evidenced by the eighteenth respondent who checked neither yes nor no.

"I've had a big change in my life due to the college experience which includes the volunteer programs. That makes it extremely difficult to gage the effects of one influence over another. During the Spring Strike (1970), my life was so affected that I imagine people in CCC (Campus Community Commission) could tell it bothered me. On the same plane, my academic life was affected. What I'm trying to say is that I can't pinpoint direct change in attitude to one cause or another. My life is too complex to answer this type of question."

The survey tried to probe still deeper to determine what kinds of changes took place because of the volunteer experience. The sample population which answered that the experience had changed their views were asked to identify which of the six listed methods of social change represented the respondent's views before volunteer work. The same six choices ranging from working in established channels to revolution were listed.

Only two of the respondents indicated a more traditional outlook on appropriate methods for change as a result of their volunteer experience. One male Senior indicated that "they (the volunteer experiences) have solidified and made more rational my views." That student indicated a change from working in peaceful demonstrations whether or not legal to working and taking part in only legal, peaceful demonstrations. He went on to say:

"It is my opinion that those who would engage in d, e, and f (Violent activities and revolution) are just as twisted and sick as that which they claim to despise. The system of American democracy is amazingly functional and open to change. But that change must come free from intimidation. It will not come overnight; it takes years. But change will come. Violence is the tactic of children and no child should be in a position to alter this government."

Three other respondents indicated that the only change was a solidification of views, not a change in the perception of appropriate methods.

"The way my views have changed is that they have become established within me. I would say that prior to my volunteer experience I was passive and uncommitted. I couldn't

remain uncommitted much longer. My volunteer experience created a tremendous impact upon my whole life."

The other seven respondents indicating a change of attitudes due to the volunteer experience all became more radical in outlook. All but one of that number would have taken part in only legal activities prior to their volunteer involvement. Only one of the seven would limit his volunteer activity to legal methods after the volunteer experience.

Three of the volunteers who became more radical due to volunteer activities added a new method to those they deemed "appropriate": revolution. Each of those three added that voluntary service "caused all the change in my attitudes" or that voluntary service "caused more change than any other activity."

To have volunteers working in the community believe in revolutionary activities as appropriate methods for changing the social system is an unusual finding. To find out that they developed that attitude as a result of their volunteer involvement is even more astounding! The author questioned those volunteers further and the following conversation seems typical of their responses.

The Author: You said in your survey form that you believed revolution was an appropriate way to change the system. Could you explain what you meant?

Volunteer: Well, revolution to a lot of people is violence. The only revolution which comes to most people's minds is the American revolution and naturally that was obtained by violence. It was overthrowing existing institutions, to put it very glorifyingly, that put the people in chains.

I would like a revolution in the existing institutions plus a revolution of the value system we have. This is what I mean by revolutionary activity. Trying to totally change, totally turn about the existing systems that we have.

Author: Are you really talking about a revolution to eliminate our present institutions or are you talking about a crisis evolution of American Institutions?

Volunteer: Maybe that hits it more closely. Given the constitution of this country, it was a document that was established for America, and I basically want to have a revolution to preserve that. And I believe strongly in what was put down in the constitution, even with as wide a range of interpretations as we have. But basically I would like to see a place where people are free, and I mean free in almost every respect, mindwise.

Author: So basically you believe in an evolutionary revolution?

Volunteer: Yes, a revolution to free the soul, maybe.

Author: Can it be peaceful?

Volunteer: A very qualified yes. Right now I strongly believe that if enough people would get into their minds that change is inevitable and that the future has to be looked at as well as the present and "Live for today" is great but let's do something about what's going to happen to our kids. I hope people get in their minds that change is inevitable and we must condition ourselves to look at change as not only adaptive to a problem. Oh Wow, there's a haze outside. There's eventually going to be a haze covering the whole earth. What are we going to do? We, as humans, have always adapted to the damn thing. We'll go out and buy oxygen masks and walk around. We won't go to the cause of the problem. There has to be a revolution in that, we have to stop adapting and start changing.

Each of the volunteers who indicated revolution as an appropriate method added a footnote of sorts. "In 'f' I refer to a non-violent peaceful revolution." "Revolutionary activities that are come by peacefully." Perhaps one of the weaknesses of the survey was that no distinction was made between "violent revolution" and a "peaceful evolution" of the system. The volunteers favored the latter.

One outstanding finding from the survey was the absence of any approval for "demonstrations with violence toward people." This could be a result of a deep reverence for life. It could also be due to the social undesirability of such a response. Even though such violence was not deemed appropriate, some of the volunteers had some fateful thoughts on the matter.

"Violence towards people is in the middle future, and I would term the next 20-30 years the middle future. It's mainly because if things don't change, if there are not enough people who really believe in peaceful revolution, then violence towards people will happen. I believe very strongly that violence toward people is inevitable, unless change comes."

Of those volunteers who would favor violence toward property as an appropriate method for change, the following statement seems typical.

"I would take part in d (violence to property) only under the most dire circumstances. And I'm not sure what they would be. I'm wholly committed to non-violence as a matter of practicality in long range terms. Violence breeds hatred; and attitudes are much more difficult to change than laws or policies at which violence is aimed. But I find no basis for making non-violence an inviolate moral dogma

either. Violence simply must be recognized for the strict limitations it has as an instrument of social change."

Two other statements must be added to complete the picture of those students who are radicalized through their volunteer experience. These also are typical of the mood of many respondents.

"The need for civil disobedience, a la King and Chavez, has been exposed to me, especially after becoming a volunteer. The greatest amount of change was due to working in the Lansing Boycott (Grapes) and Gene McCarthy and Richard Austin (for Mayor of Detroit) campaigns in 1968-69."

"I really believe that my participation in a volunteer program is a means of peaceful demonstration. If I thought everything was fine, I wouldn't be involved in any volunteer activity."

SUMMARY: At this point, generalizations are hard come by. The volunteer experience seems to radicalize certain volunteers, while other members of the same program become more conservative. Many volunteers do not seem to change their views regarding appropriate methods for social change. This may indicate that they joined the volunteer program either because they believed in working through the system or the other alternative is that social action does not enter into the picture. Their activity within the volunteer realm may be for other reasons or rewards.

It seems rather significant that there is no wide gap between the attitudes of volunteers and non-volunteers, At least by self-report, twelve of the eighteen volunteers sampled were changed by the volunteer activity. The change seems to better match their attitudes on methods with those of their peers. Their peers may also be changed by non-volunteer forces. Who is changed is not really known. It is not even certain that volunteers are actually changed by the volunteer experience. Their self-reports which show change could be biased by limited recollection or perception.

It is evident that the majority of this volunteer sample see something wrong with the system. Their approaches to correction of the wrongs is diversified except in one respect: they volunteer as a means for social change. Volunteerism is a means of "peaceful demonstration." This does not imply that volunteers may not be sitting in buildings and attending rallies.

Further research is needed, but at least initially volunteerism seems to radicalize more volunteers than not. Perhaps the best explanation of the volunteer experience and its impact upon college students can be stated by the following survey comment.

"I guess it opened my eyes really to what the hell was going

on. I was living in a little dorm room and then I moved to a fraternity house and I just walked from the fraternity house to campus and back. I met people and went to mixers and then I started working with this (volunteer) project and found there were other people around that needed and I was just yanked out of that (college) environment and put in another environment, the real one. And I saw how things worked out there. I didn't like it. I took a look at myself and through that process of stepping into volunteer work, it became a process of changing me."