Volume 15 | Issue 1 | Article 3

AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF PARAMEDICINE

PARAMEDICS AUSTRALASIA

Undergraduate paramedic students' perceptions of a community volunteer placement

Tania Johnston
Charles Sturt University, School of Biomedical Sciences, Port Macquarie, New South Wales

Joe Acker
Charles Sturt University, School of Biomedical Sciences, Port Macquarie, New South Wales
University of British Columbia, Faculty of Medicine, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Alexander MacQuarrie
Charles Sturt University, School of Biomedical Sciences, Bathurst, New South Wales

Research

Undergraduate paramedic students' perceptions of a community volunteer placement

Tania Johnston ACP, BScN, MHS, is a Lecturer in Paramedicine[1]; Joe Acker ACP, MA, is Adjunct Lecturer in Paramedicine[1] and Adjunct Professor[2]; Alexander MacQuarrie CCP, BSc, MBA, is a Lecturer in Paramedicine and PhD candidate[3]

Affiliation:
[1]Charles Sturt University, School of Biomedical Sciences, Port Macquarie, New South Wales
[2]University of British Columbia, Faculty of Medicine, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
[3]Charles Sturt University, School of Biomedical Sciences, Bathurst, New South Wales

Abstract

Objective
This study aimed to explore first year university paramedic students' perceptions of volunteerism during a community placement.

Methods
In this exploratory study we employed a cross-sectional methodology utilising a convenience sample of first year undergraduate students. Administering a paper-based survey, we measured students' perceptions of their experience of a 50-hour placement as a volunteer within a community organisation.

Results
Of the 191 students available to participate in the study, 88 completed the survey yielding a 46.1% response rate. Survey results were positive overall and indicated that students view volunteering in a community placement as a good experience. The majority of students signalled that they had a positive impact during their placement and were inclined towards future volunteering including as paramedic volunteers.

Conclusion
Our results suggest that paramedic students positively perceive volunteering during a community placement and may be predisposed to future volunteer opportunities.

Keywords:
paramedic; student; volunteer; community; placement

Corresponding Author: Tania Johnston, tjohnston@csu.edu.au

Introduction

While offering students theoretical knowledge in the classroom, paramedic degrees rely heavily on ambulance clinical placements to link theory to practice (1,2). Workplace learning plays a key role in paramedic student education (1,3) with universities increasingly competing for clinical placements in Australia (4-6). As part of a strategy to look beyond traditional ambulance placements for quality experiential learning opportunities, we introduced a structured volunteer program to first year paramedic students at Charles Sturt University. In this program we sought to expose students to organisations where they could gain real world experience while also making a positive contribution to local communities. After students completed the program, we solicited their feedback to better understand their perceptions of volunteering during their community placement.

Why volunteer?
Volunteerism has long been associated with paramedic practice in Australia (7,8). Gage and Thapa (9) define volunteerism as 'a contribution to society in one form or another without monetary compensation'. Researchers have identified a range of motives for volunteers including wanting to make a difference in their community and taking pleasure in helping others (10,11). With the exception of blood donation however, volunteering is not necessarily considered an altruistic behaviour (12). Rather, volunteer activities are typically mutually beneficial to both the volunteer and the organisation. Polonsky asserts that those who engage in charitable activities do so with motives that are both intrinsic and egotistical (13). Volunteers are often motivated by a desire to prepare for future careers while increasing their knowledge and skill sets (14). Additionally, volunteers may want to develop deeper social connections or seek opportunities to enhance their egos and self esteem. Yet others may participate in volunteerism out of pity, to share their values or to alleviate feelings of guilt (10,13,14).

The practice and motives of student volunteering to meet intrinsic needs can be better understood through the lens of social theory. Erikson theorised that identity or sense of self begins to form as youth transition to adulthood (15). He noted 'identity versus identity diffusion' as one of eight key stages of growth and development. Erikson posited that over one's lifespan, a person begins with an undifferentiated and loosely defined sense of identity that eventually forecloses as he or she develops more certainty over their beliefs and values (16). These beliefs and values can be linked to the young person's motivation to volunteer as they find their place in the community, seek purpose in life and evolve from adolescence to citizen (15).

Volunteerism at university
First introduced as a bridge from youth to adulthood, universities have traditionally promoted volunteerism to develop civic responsibility and enhance life skills while also supporting students' educational achievements (17,18). It has been suggested that universities actually have a responsibility to emphasise and support student community engagement both for the public good as well as to develop future graduates as citizens (17-20). Even before university, research supports that high schools play an important role in nurturing civic commitment in young people and helping to instil public interest as an inherent life goal (13).

Service learning, a more formalised form of volunteering at university, is associated with a number of student benefits. First, it provides students with opportunities to develop and practise a range of personal skills including problem solving and communication (19). Second, experience gained in volunteer roles can be included on student employment resumes and used to demonstrate desirable characteristics to future employers that are otherwise difficult to quantify (21,22). Third, volunteering is typically associated with enhanced student learning and overall satisfaction with their university experience (17). Despite these documented benefits, researchers caution that busy students may perceive mandatory volunteer programs as an added burden that detracts from achieving academic goals (17,20,23).

Workplace learning in paramedicine
A community volunteer program was introduced to augment the Charles Sturt University Bachelor of Clinical Practice (Paramedic) degree's longstanding ambulance workplace learning placements. Similar to many professions, paramedicine involves attaining practical experience throughout the course of study. It has been shown that students who participate in experiential educational activities greatly benefit from these intensive experiences wherein they are immersed with mentors or advisors and exposed to a diverse range of people and situations (24). Among others, this pedagogical approach is informed by Kolb's experiential learning theory and Gibb's model for reflection (25,26). Kolb's theoretical cycle of learning involves the learner first grasping concrete experience before transforming it into new knowledge through reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (27). Workplace learning in the form of practicums, placements or internships gives students access to this concrete, immediate experience and is key to successful student engagement (25). It is important that learners critically reflect on this experience to develop self-awareness and improve future practice.

The Gibb's model is one approach to reflection and involves students describing their experience and exploring their feelings about it. Students then evaluate and analyse this experience to understand what they learned before using this as a foundation to make a plan for the future (26). The practical experience paramedic students gain while on a placement facilitates connecting what they have learned in school to their future professional practice (24,25).

Volunteering in community placements

A review of the literature suggests that non-traditional workplace learning placements have been successfully integrated in health education to enhance student learning in real situations (28-30). Bassi describes how this can be done through service learning as an 'experiential teaching method that combines instruction with community service' (31). Exposing students to real people in real world circumstances offers opportunities to interact with patients or clients alongside other health care professionals in authentic settings without the pressure of multitasking and feeling rushed. In one example, medical students volunteered in rural and underserved areas in homeless shelters, schools and community programs as part of their curriculum. These students subsequently reported improved social and communication skills as well as a better understanding of interprofessional practice (29). In another example, Australian paramedic students cared for elderly dementia patients in a residential care facility. They reported an improved capacity to deal with death and dying along with an enhanced ability to communicate with seniors (28). Additional studies of undergraduate nursing students found a strong correlation between service learning and increased self-confidence and interpersonal skills (31,32). Among other undergraduates, volunteering with elderly persons has demonstrated increased student appreciation for their needs (11) while volunteering has also been shown to improve attitudes towards specific groups of people (33). In general, student volunteering in any capacity is associated with improved problem solving skills (19), enhanced leadership and conflict resolution abilities (17,21), and increased feelings of self-esteem (10,11).

The Charles Sturt University project

Charles Sturt University exists 'for the public good' and to 'develop holistic, far-sighted people who help their communities grow and flourish' (34). Aligning with the university's commitment to developing strong relationships within regional communities, we trialled the implementation of a community volunteer placement for first year Bachelor of Clinical Practice (Paramedic) students. Students participated in a community placement with the intended goals of exposing them to real world examples of teamwork, communication, critical reflection, relationship building, ethical practice and conflict resolution (35). In preparation for their placement they were introduced to models of reflective practice including Gibb's model (26). Furthermore, students were encouraged to critically reflect on their experience throughout the placement and as part of a final presentation they completed for the subject. This placement project was supported by a grant from the Health Education and Training Institute.

Study design

This exploratory study employed a cross-sectional methodology utilising a convenience sample of first year undergraduate paramedic students, incorporating a purpose designed paper-based survey instrument.

Participants

Participants were eligible to be enrolled in this study if they were first year Charles Sturt University paramedic students who had completed the 50-hour community placement in their first year clinical subject.

The community volunteer placement

All students completed a minimum of 50 hours placement as volunteers within the community. The students could choose from suggested sites or could source their own organisation as long as the lecturers confirmed there was alignment with the intended learning outcomes. Key aims for the placement focussed on exposing students to environments where they could interact with patients, community members and professional colleagues in order to practise communication, leadership and teamwork skills (35). This project involved a range of organisations, including: mental health crisis teams, foster carers, Indigenous health, community nursing, meals on wheels, general practice clinics and youth and aged care service providers. For practical reasons, students attended only one placement organisation and performed a range of duties specific to the environment. Wearing their student uniform, they completed a series of shifts with varying lengths depending on the organisation. Standard placement requirements included an up-to-date immunisation record, the Working with Children and National Police certificates, as well as current first aid and automated external defibrillator training. Students were expected to adhere to strict university codes of conduct and confidentiality policies governing practice.

Instrumentation

On completion of the community placement we conducted a survey using a de-identified questionnaire containing 17 items with a combination of binary 'yes'/'no' questions, multi-choice demographic questions, questions using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and free text responses. In addition to seven questions designed to collect demographic data, 10 survey questions were intended to assess students' perceptions of the placement, any positive outcomes, their general attitudes towards the volunteer experience and disposition towards future volunteering. The complete survey is available from the corresponding author on request.

Procedures

The survey was conducted at Charles Sturt University at both the Bathurst and Port Macquarie campuses after the last lecture of session one in 2013. All students who attended the lecture were invited to participate in the survey on a voluntary basis. Before distributing a participant information sheet, non-academic staff informed the students that their participation was voluntary and that the results would be de-identified before analysis. The survey took students approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. The surveys were only distributed once and there were no follow-up surveys conducted.

Data analysis

Data from the survey were analysed for frequency counts using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 17.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA.).

Ethics

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Charles Sturt University School of Biomedical Sciences Ethics in Human Research Committee. The Charles Sturt University Clinical Placement Policies and Procedures are in place to address ethical considerations for clinical placements.

All students must complete an induction before performing any placement related activities. This includes a workplace safety orientation. Furthermore, in accordance with policy, students on placement perform duties under direct supervision with clear expectations to act ethically, professionally and safely. Throughout the course of their placement, students must always put the welfare of the patient or client first by respecting confidentiality and assisting or interacting within their prerequisite level of training and capability. They must adhere to social networking policies, wear the prescribed uniform and always follow their supervisor's directions. Students and preceptors have 24-hour access to a university clinical placement coordinator who is available for advice and support.

Results

Participant data

There were 191 first year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Clinical Practice who were available to participate in the study across both campuses, 163 at the Bathurst campus and 28 at the Port Macquarie campus. The post-placement survey was completed by 88 students in total with participation rates of 41.1% (67) from Bathurst and 75% (21) from Port Macquarie. Overall response rate was 46.1%. As the survey was distributed during the final lecture of the session, only those students who attended the lecture were invited to participate. This had a significant impact on participation numbers, especially in Bathurst. The groups from each campus were similar in age, gender and socioeconomic background. Note that all data, unless otherwise specified, are pooled from the two campuses.

Quantitative data

Frequency analysis of demographic data showed that 58% of the students were male with a distribution of ages as per Table 1. Most (64.8%) had median annual family incomes of $80,000 or less, and the majority were employed (79.5%). Of those employed, 20.5% worked full time, 15.9% worked part time and 43.2% had casual employment (Table 2).

Table 1. Age of participants across both campuses (n=88)

Age range (years)	Percent of respondents
17–20	47.7%
21–25	31.8%
26–30	13.6%
31–40	3.4%
>41	3.4%

Table 2. Employment status of participants across both campuses (n=88)

Employment status	Percent of respondents
Unemployed	17%
Full-time	20.5%
Part-time	15.9%
Casual	43.2%
Self employed	3.4%

Frequency analysis of the survey questions concerning the volunteer experience when analysed by question demonstrated strong agreement with selected statements (Table 3). The results show 77.3% of students stated they either agreed or strongly agreed with the question: 'I feel that I made a difference at the agency(s) I was placed with' while 67% of students stated they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'Because of this placement I am more likely to volunteer in my community in the future'. Sixty-nine percent of students signalled that they would consider ongoing volunteer work with the organisation they did their placement with. Looking to the future, 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would engage in volunteering as a paramedic while 93.6% suggested that they would volunteer as a paramedic in the event of a natural disaster, pandemic or major terrorist event. Though the majority of students also responded positively when asked if they felt more confident in their ability to communicate and interact with people, examining these findings is beyond the scope of this paper.

Discussion

After collating and analysing the survey results our findings indicate that students reported positively when surveyed after a 50-hour community volunteer placement. Spending time as volunteers with community organisations as part of their paramedic curriculum proved to provide positive real world experiences for our students while contributing to developing their sense of civic responsibility as future volunteers.

Table 3. Participant responses to select survey questions

Survey question	Responses				
	Yes	No			
Q8. Were you previously aware of opportunities available for volunteering at your placement site?	36%	64%			
Q9. Will you continue to volunteer with the same organisation?	69%	31%			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Q11. I feel I made a difference at the agency I was placed with	1.1%	3.4%	18.2%	64.8%	12.5%
Q15. Because of this placement I am more likely to volunteer in my community in the future	1.1%	3.4%	28.4%	53.4%	13.6%
Q16. I would volunteer as a paramedic in my community for no pay on my days off if required	2.3%	11.4%	36%	42%	8%
Q17. In the event of a severe natural disaster, pandemic, or major terrorist event, I would volunteer as a paramedic in my community for no pay if required	1.1%	0%	2.3%	25%	71.6%

Positive real world experiences and interactions

Consistent with similar studies involving health care students (28-30), our study suggests that volunteering provides paramedic students with valuable learning experience. The majority of our students indicated that they would return to their organisation for future volunteering, signalling that they enjoyed and benefited from the opportunity. As we continue to seek out valuable workplace learning experiences for our students, we are ever mindful that they need time and exposure to quality interactions. Research has shown that a university student's motivation to volunteer is often driven by a desire for social interaction and that service learning offers students an opportunity to better understand the world they live in (1,9,21). This is especially relevant to our program given that previous research found undergraduate students can lack the ability to engage in the meaningful social relationships required of working paramedics (36). Our community placement program exposed students to real world experience as volunteers in community settings offering a range of services including mental health, foster care, Indigenous health, community nursing and child, youth and aged care (35). Though each placement offered students variable experience, they were all given the opportunity to meet, interview and interact with a number of patients or clients in a range of ways. In comparison to the high pressure and rapid pace of typical ambulance jobs, these interactions afforded students time to engage with patients and health care providers. Though further research is needed to understand more about their specific experiences, these preliminary results signal that our paramedic students enjoyed and found personal value in their placement and associated interactions. This finding has encouraged our paramedic program to pursue future community volunteer opportunities for our students.

Developing civic responsibility

Bringle and Hatcher suggest that universities see beyond the goal of extending experiential learning opportunities and aim for students to concurrently develop their civic responsibilities (19). Universities can offer opportunities to extend student skills while also enhancing citizenship and developing civic behaviours (19,37). Our results suggest that engaging in the community placement may encourage and support future civic responsible behaviours. Studies have shown that student service learning is a predictor of future volunteerism (38,39) and that students are more likely to volunteer if they feel that they are actually making a difference (23).

In our study, 77.3% of students surveyed felt that they made a positive contribution during their placement while 67% indicated that this placement would improve their likelihood of future volunteer work. The majority also noted that they are open to future paramedic volunteerism, especially in the event of a major incident. Evidence also suggests that lecturer attitudes toward community service learning can positively influence student attitudes and subsequent outcomes (20). The best outcomes have been observed when university lecturers promote student reflection (20) while integrating experiential learning from the community placement back into the classroom environment (18,19). Ultimately, key characteristics of effective university-community relationships include being mutually beneficial and important to both partners while maintaining a student-centred philosophy that is guided by university strategy (19,29).

Limitations

Though this study contributes to the body of knowledge of non-traditional placements and student volunteerism, it has limitations. First, the study design could be improved with a more rigorous approach to survey development and the addition of qualitative data collection. Second, though the use of convenience sampling helped facilitate recruitment, given that the survey was conducted during the final lecture of the session there is the potential that those who participated may be more academically inclined or committed learners. This approach to sampling could introduce bias into the participant sample while reducing participation rates.

Conclusion

Given the competition among Australian universities for workplace learning opportunities, community volunteer programs can provide students with real world experience to augment ambulance placements. Our results suggest that paramedic students positively perceive volunteering during a community placement and may be predisposed to future volunteer opportunities.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests. The authors of this paper have completed the ICMJE conflict of interest statement.

Author contributions

Tania Johnston was the principal author of the manuscript, contributed to the design of the questionnaire, and contributed to the data analysis. Joe Acker developed the concept and study design, developed the questionnaire, collected the data, and contributed to drafting the manuscript and the final editing. Alexander MacQuarrie contributed to the study design and concept, questionnaire design, data sorting, and statistical analyses.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the paramedic students who generously gave their time to participate in the study and the reviewers for reviewing the manuscript and providing constructive feedback. The authors would also like to acknowledge Dr Peter Micalos for providing assistance with the statistical analysis and Amanda Hlushak for her contributions to the survey tool and study concept.

The authors are also appreciative of the generous support of the many community organisations that hosted paramedic students on these placements. In addition, we recognise the grant funding from the Health Education and Training Institute, which made this placement trial possible.

References

1. Boyle M, Williams B, Cooper J, Adams B, Alford K. Ambulance clinical placements – a pilot study of students' experience. BMC Med Educ 2008;8:8–19.
2. Clements R, Mackenzie R. Competence in prehospital care: evolving concepts. Emerg Med J 2005;22:516–9.
3. Hou X-Y, Rego J, Service M. Review article: paramedic education opportunities and challenges in Australia. Emergency Medicine Australasia 2013;25:114–9.
4. Joyce C, Wainer J, Piterman L, Wyatt A, Archer F. Trends in the paramedic workforce: a profession in transition. Aust Health Rev 2009;33:533–40.
5. Jolly B, Sutton, B, Workman B. Mornington Peninsula Clinical Placement Network Aged Care Services Project, 2012.
6. O'Brien K, Moore A, Hartley P, Dawson D. Lessons about work readiness from final year paramedic students in an Australian university. Australasian Journal of Paramedicine 2014;10(4).
7. O'Meara P. The prehospital community-volunteer model has a place in rural Australia. Journal of Emergency Primary Health Care 2003;1(1/2).
8. O'Meara P, Grbich C. Paramedicine in Australia: contemporary challenges of practice. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia; 2009.
9. Gage RL, Thapa B. Volunteer motivations and constraints among college students: analysis of the volunteer function inventory and leisure constraints models. Nonprofit Volunt Sect Q 2012;41:405–30.
10. Taylor TP, Pancer SM. Community service experiences and commitment to volunteering. J Appl Soc Psychol 2007;37:320–45.

References (continued)

11. Piliavin JA. Doing well by doing good: benefits for the benefactor. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2003.
12. Alessandrini M. Community volunteerism and blood donation: altruism as a lifestyle choice. Transfus Med Rev 2007;21:307–16.
13. Polonsky MJ, Shelley L, Voola R. An examination of helping behavior - some evidence from Australia. Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing 2002;10:67–82.
14. Clary EG, Snyder M, Ridge RD, et al. Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: a functional approach. J Pers Soc Psychol 1998;74:1516–30.
15. Flanagan CA, Bowes JM, Jonsson B, Csapo B, Sheblanova E. Ties that bind. J Soc Issues 1998;54:457–75.
16. Vondracek FW. The construct of identity and its use in career theory and research. Career Dev Q 1992;41:130–44.
17. Astin AW, Sax LJ. How undergraduates are affected by service participation. Journal of College Student Development 1998;39:251–63.
18. Markus GB, Howard JPF, King DC. Integrating community service and classroom instruction enhances learning: results from an experiment. Educ Eval Policy Anal 1993;15:410–9.
19. Bringle RG, Hatcher JA. Implementing service learning in higher education. J Higher Educ 1996:221–39.
20. Beehr TA, LeGro K, Porter K, Bowling NA, Swader WM. Required volunteers: community volunteerism among students in college classes. Teach Psychol 2010;37:276–80.
21. Handy F, Cnaan RA, Hustinx L, et al. A cross-cultural examination of student volunteering: Is it all about résumé building? Nonprofit Volunt Sect Q 2010;39:498–523.
22. Hustinx L, Handy F, Cnaan RA, Brudney JL, Pessi AB, Yamauchi N. Social and cultural origins of motivations to volunteer: a comparison of university students in six countries. Int Sociol 2010;25:349–82.
23. Cruce TM, Moore JV, III. Community service during the first year of college: What is the role of past behavior? J Coll Stud Dev 2012;53:399–417.
24. Kuh G. Why integration and engagement are essential to effective educational practice in the twenty-first century. Peer Rev 2008;10:27–8.
25. Stirling A, Kerr G, MacPherson E, Banwell J, Bandealy A, Battaglia A. Do post secondary internships address the four learning modes of experiential learning theory? An exploration through document analysis. Can J High Educ 2017;47:27–48.
26. Richardson M. Reflective practice in relation to pre-hospital care: a theoretical perspective. In: Blaber A, editor. Foundations for paramedic practice. Second edn. Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: The McGraw-Hill Companies; 2012.
27. Kolb DA, Boyatzis RE, Mainemelis C, Sternberg RE, Zhang LF. Experiential learning theory: previous research and new directions. Perspectives on Thinking, Learning, and Cognitive Styles. Editors Sternberg RJ, Zhang LF, Mahwah NJ. 2001;1:227–47.
28. Lucas P, McCall M, Lea E, et al. Clinical placements in residential care facilities. Part 1: positive experiences. Journal of Paramedic Practice 2013;5(7).
29. Sheridan MEB, Blue AV, Basco WT. Promoting students' community service during medical school: the MUSC gives back office. Teach Learn Med 2010;22:214–8.
30. Ross L. Interpersonal skills education for undergraduate nurses and paramedics. Journal of Paramedic Practice 2012;4:655–61.
31. Bassi S. Undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of service-learning through a school-based community project. Nurs Educ Perspect 2011;32:162–7.
32. Purdie A, Sheward L, Gifford E. Student nurse placements take a new direction. Nurse Educ Pract 2008;8:315–20.
33. Batchelder TH, Root S. Effects of an undergraduate program to integrate academic learning and service: cognitive, prosocial cognitive, and identity outcomes. J Adolesc 1994;17:341–55.
34. Charles Sturt University. University Strategy 2013-2015 2012 Available at: www.csu.edu.au/division/vcoffice/office-of-the-vice-chancellor/strategy-structure
35. Charles Sturt University. CLS103 Paramedic Community Internship Subject Overview 2013 Available at: www.csu.edu.au/handbook/subjects/CLS103.html
36. Lazarsfeld-Jensen A. Starting young: the challenge of developing graduates' road readiness. Journal of Paramedic Practice 2010;2:368–72.
37. Weber JE, Weber PS, Schneider K, Sleeper BJ. Preparing students for citizenship: an exploration of the antecedents and outcomes of self-efficacy toward service. Journal of Business Inquiry: Research, Education & Application 2007;6:3–10.
38. Oesterle S, Kirkpatrick-Johnson M, Mortimer J. Volunteerism during the transition to adulthood: a life course perspective. Social Forces 2004;82:1123–49.
39. Burns DJ, Toncar M, Reid J, et al. Volunteering: a comparison of the motivations of collegiate students attending different types of institutions. J Volunt Admin 2005;23:31.