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## Motivations to Volunteer: Factors that promote longevity

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Motivations to Volunteer:  
Factors that promote longevity

Submitted by Daniel Bubna  
May, 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University & University of St. Thomas  
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## **Abstract**

Qualitative data was obtained to better understand the motivations and experiences of volunteer counselors. The procedural method of this study utilized exploratory interviews of six volunteer counselors. The participants are non-professionals who are actively engaged in individual counseling of members of the community who don't have insurance. Participants reflected on their motivations, experiences, and level of satisfaction with their service as a volunteer counselor. Results indicated high levels of satisfaction due to intrinsic motivations of the individual participants as well as organizational competencies in regards to training and supervision. The study highlights both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that can contribute to increased longevity and higher retention rates amongst volunteer counselors. Implications and limitations associated with the research are considered.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank those who were a part of making this project possible. First to Colin, for supporting and prioritizing me as a person above and beyond as a student. To Rob and Kevin, I will always be grateful for the gracious giving of your time and your genuine enthusiasm about this project. To the incredible volunteer counselors that participated in this research, your passion and humility have filled me with hope, thank you for sharing your stories. And finally to Renee, simply saying thank you is not sufficient, without your sacrifice and support, nothing I have accomplished over the last few years would have been possible. I share this with you.

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## Introduction

The current challenges facing our nation's economy are having an impact on the field of social work. The familiar obstacle of limited funding and resources will only become more prevalent in the path of social workers in the years to come. How this issue is dealt with now will have vast ramifications for the future of the profession. As budgets are cut and programs are closed, professionals in the field will have to rely more than ever on their creativity and resourcefulness to be a force for change in our society. Organizations with limited financial resources have no choice but to utilize volunteers in order to provide outstanding service to their communities (Independent Sector, 2001). Utilizing volunteers in the face of budget constraints as supplemental sources of fervor, creativity, and innovative ideas is pivotal.

Non-profits are increasingly dependent on volunteers to provide services to their communities. According to a national survey conducted by the Independent Sector in 2001, 44% of the U.S. adult population had volunteered with a formal organization at some point in the previous 12 months before the survey was conducted, representing approximately 84 million people. According to that same survey, that year the volunteer workforce volunteered 15.5 billion hours of their time, which represents the equivalent of over 9 million employees at a value of 239 billion dollars. Despite those impressive numbers, if the pattern of decreased government spending on social services continues, the need for volunteers will increase. Thus raising the importance of learning about what motivates people to volunteer and causes them to continue to volunteer over long periods of time (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998).

When it comes to individual counseling, the utilization of volunteers presents a unique set of challenges. Counseling is not a job where fervor and passion will be sufficient. Specific knowledge and competencies must be in place for volunteers to effectively serve clients. Due to the challenging nature of this work, recruitment and training can consume time and resources that are already in short supply. This type of volunteer work also requires a much higher level of ongoing supervision and support to ensure the safety and welfare of the clients. The decision to engage in such a serious form of volunteering is not one that is reached lightly. Clary and Snyder (1999) argue that the decision to disengage in helping services is not reached lightly either and is heavily influenced by whether the helper's own personal needs and goals are being met. People volunteer for different reasons and have different goals in mind for their volunteer experience. Organizations need to understand their volunteer's goals and facilitate them if they want to increase their retention rates. While there is a body of literature evaluating what motivates and helps promote sustained volunteering in general, very little research has been focused on volunteer counselors. This research aims in part to address that gap in the literature and answer the following question: What motivates people to volunteer and what can be done to increase retention and promote longevity?

Volunteering or volunteerism can mean different things to different people. Penner (2002) defines volunteerism as "long-term, planned pro-social behaviors that benefit strangers and occur within an organizational setting. Based on this definition, volunteerism has four salient attributes: longevity, planfulness, nonobligatory helping, and an organizational context." In this study, volunteerism will be defined and understood as planned pro-social behaviors that benefit strangers and occur within an

organizational setting. The study will seek to better understand what factors lead to longevity in volunteering.

## Literature Review

### Volunteer Motives and Identity

Clary and Snyder (1999) used functional theorizing about the motivations underlying pro-social behavior and were able to identify six personal and social functions that are potentially served by volunteering. The six motives are: 1) Values, the individual volunteers in order to act on important values such as humanitarianism. 2) Understanding, trying to understand the world and utilize skills they often don't use. 3) Enhancement, to grow and develop psychologically. 4) Career, to enhance job prospects and gain work experience. 5) Social, to strengthen ties to a network of friends who value volunteerism. 6) Protective, to escape their own troubles and reduce negative feelings such as guilt. They developed an inventory to assess those motivational functions and explore what role motivations play in the process of deciding to volunteer and also deciding to continue to volunteer. To test their theory, they developed video advertising messages that appealed to a specific motivational function. Then they randomly assigned participants to watch either a functionally matched or a functionally mismatched video based off their earlier assessments of their motivational functions. As they had hypothesized those that were matched up with a video that appealed to their motivational functions were much more likely to respond positively and intend to volunteer in the future. Their findings indicated that values, understanding, and enhancement were the most prevalent motivational functions. The findings were a clear indicator of the multi-faceted nature of a volunteer's motivations. Approximately two thirds of respondents identified having two or more motivations that were important to them. Clary and Snyder

(1999) believe that this research sheds light on the altruism (concern for others) versus egoism (concern for self) debate in regards to volunteerism. They argue that people's motivations for volunteering are multifaceted and complex, they can't be simply categorized as altruistic or egoistic. They argue this not just because respondents indicate both kinds of reasons for volunteering but also because certain motives themselves are a combination of concern for self and concern for others. Several months later they found that the respondents who were receiving functionally relevant benefits were much more satisfied with their volunteer experience and indicated a higher intention to continue volunteering than those who did not. The respondents in this study were university students, for some of these students community service was an educational requirement in order for them to graduate. Their study clearly found that requiring the act of volunteering decreased the student's desire to volunteer in the future. Those who were able to maintain a sense of personal control over the decision to volunteer were much more likely to continue volunteering in the future. Thus, Clary and Snyder (1999) urge caution to be exercised when considering any kind of external pressures or requirements for volunteering.

The concept of a volunteer role identity was developed by Grube and Piliavin (2000). They define role identities as "components of the self that correspond to the social roles we play." They discussed the implications of how initial volunteerism impacts sustained volunteerism. They found that the initial experience with the organization is critical. The more they are able to help volunteers develop a sense of "status" or a positive role identity, the more sustained volunteerism they will get out of their investment. These findings were based off a study of volunteers for the American

Cancer Society. Utilizing convenience sampling and also mailing out written surveys, they were able to collect 559 surveys. Lee, Piliavin, et al., (1999) conducted similar research to test the application of role identity theory. They analyzed the National Charity Survey that was conducted in 1989, it was a telephone interview study done with a national probability sample of 1,002 respondents. They determined that their research was pertinent to all areas of volunteerism. They found that the key factors to developing a strong volunteer role identity were based in meeting the volunteer's egoistic needs. Feelings of self-importance and prestige within the organizational context were strong indicators of length of service. They also found that the greatest predictors of a role identity come from past behaviors and modeling. Those whose parents modeled volunteering behaviors during their childhood were the most prone to become long-term committed volunteers. Rarely was long-term volunteerism seen from someone who didn't have a history of past volunteering behaviors.

Davis et., al. (1999) conducted studies to take a closer look at the relationship between dispositional empathy and volunteering. Dispositional empathy was defined as demonstrated empathic concern for the plight of others. They acknowledged that sufficient evidence exists to show that empathy can predict the likelihood that someone will respond positively when they encounter a situation where someone needs help. But their goal was to study if dispositional empathy influences a pre-meditated decision to intentionally seek out opportunities to help those in need. Another measurement as a converse to empathy was personal distress. Some people when faced with troubling situations have the tendency to feel personal distress over true empathy. They found a great deal of evidence to support that dispositional empathy leads people to engage in

sustained volunteerism. The study showed that those with high levels of empathy were usually seeking out experiences with very needy people whereas those who had higher feelings of personal distress tended to shy away from situations with more serious needs. The implication for those who recruit, train, and place volunteers, is that volunteers need to be properly matched. Those with high levels of empathy need to be placed in situations where there is high emotional involvement, thus increasing their levels of satisfaction. Those who feel more personal distress need to be placed in roles and situations that minimize stress and therefore maximize their feelings of satisfaction. To avoid investing time and resources into a volunteer who will ultimately not find satisfaction in the particular setting, it is important for organizations to be very explicit about helping potential volunteers to truly understand and get an accurate picture of what the nature of the work is. Davis et., al (1999) indicated in the conclusion of their study that they believed the greatest practical importance of this work is to emphasize the importance of finding good “fits” between volunteers and their work. The organizations that struggle the most with volunteer retention are those that take a “one size fits all” approach.

Liao-Troth (2005) conducted a study to measure the relationship between motivational and personality factors on volunteer’s psychological contract. The psychological contract is the term used to explain the agreement between volunteers and organizations since the majority of the time volunteering requires no formal or legally binding contract. The psychological contract, as defined by Liao-Troth, is what a volunteer feels they owe the organization and what they feel like the organization owes them in return. This was then broken down into two categories: relational psychological contracts and transactional psychological contracts. In a transactional contract a volunteer

would be concerned about more tangible gains such as experience and career advancement. In a relational contract the volunteer is more concerned with understanding and personal enhancement. Liao-Troth (2005) conducted the same study with two separate samples. The first one was made up of 85 executive officers from volunteer fire stations from all over the United States. The second was made up of 105 student volunteers from a mid-western university. The same volunteer functional inventory was used as which was previously discussed in the research of Clary and Snyder (1999). The study found certain considerations for recruiting and placing volunteers. The career motive and a conscientious personality are a better fit for transactional psychological contracts, while agreeableness and emotional stability stood out as personality factors that lent themselves to relational psychological contracts. This study also found the common theme of under-communicating in the initial process of bringing in volunteers. The main implication for practice is that volunteer managers have to go further in ensuring that the volunteer clearly understands what they are engaging in and what exactly is expected of them during the initial phase of training.

### **Structural Determinants**

Omoto and Snyder (2002) sought to examine the role that community plays in understanding volunteerism. They conducted a longitudinal study on AIDS volunteers utilizing secondary data. They found that the motivations of volunteers are unique and multi-faceted, not easily categorized. They broke volunteering down into a process with three phases: antecedents, experiences, and consequences. To study them they utilized three levels of analysis: individual, organization, and social system. They found that

community played a huge role in the motivations for volunteering. First of all, volunteers were much more likely to engage with a population or issue that was prevalent in their own communities. The vast majority of volunteers also came from communities where volunteering behaviors were modeled by friends or family. Also highlighted was how longevity was positively related to feeling a sense of community in the organization in which they are volunteering. In an earlier study, Omoto and Snyder (1995) used a very similar framework with a sample made up of AIDS volunteers. The sample consisted of 116 AIDS volunteers who were studied over the course of two and a half years. They found that “motivational properties simply may be linked more readily than dispositional attributes to the characteristics of volunteerism that most clearly invoke agentic considerations of purpose, namely, that is actively sought out, deliberately pursued, and sustained over time.” (p.684) They propose that satisfaction with the organization, commitment to the organization, and the connection between the volunteer experience and the person’s motives had a direct impact on how long the individual served as a volunteer. In evaluating this study, Penner and Finkelstein (1998) noted that, “Motives also predicted length of service. Interestingly, however, it was egoistic, self-centered motives rather than altruistic or other-oriented motives that were positively associated with length of service.” (p.525).

Fisher and Ackerman (1998) took a look at how social norms and group recognition impact the decision to volunteer. They look through the social norm perspective at how certain volunteer behaviors become part of social expectations for those who want to be accepted and recognized in certain ways. Combining appeals to group needs and promising social recognition was found to be extremely effective in

volunteer recruitment. This was a very unique study. They randomly selected 140 students from a business school. They went into mandatory introduction to business classes and took some normal class time to present volunteer opportunities to the students. They showed them recruitment posters and other tools and asked them to rate their effectiveness. They found that the advertisements which promoted personal rewards and benefits were much more effective. Also of particular appeal were advertisements that promoted “Charity Week” in which they would be competing with other business schools to see who could raise the most money. However, they found that the promise of recognition only had a significant impact on volunteer participation when the group seeking support was portrayed as needy. (p.273) This study continues the emphasis in the literature on how certain egoistic motivations play into the decision to volunteer. Most people would not think that public recognition would be a motivating factor for work that is altruistic in nature. However, we all get caught up in the norms and expectations of whatever groups we belong to and want to be regarded highly based off those expectations.

### **Altruism vs. Egoism**

The modeling of volunteerism and altruistic behaviors by parents was also explored by Clary and Miller (1986). They studied the influences on sustained altruistic behavior. Their sample consisted of 162 crisis-counseling volunteers all working at the same agency. They divided volunteers into two categories autonomous altruists and normative altruists. Autonomous volunteers were those who came from backgrounds with nurturing parents who modeled altruistic behaviors. Normative volunteers were

those whose parents modeled altruism to a lesser degree and were not as nurturing. As they predicted, they found a much higher level of commitment and longevity from autonomous volunteers as opposed to normative volunteers. However, when normative volunteers were a part of highly cohesive training groups their levels of sustained altruism rose dramatically. They did not find that autonomous altruists experienced any significant changes as a result of participating in the same training groups. There was also evidence to support the strong correlations between empathy and altruism. Autonomous altruists had significantly higher empathy scores than their normative counterparts. One of the most important findings in this study for volunteer managers is the positive results from cohesive training groups. Providing a training experience where volunteers immediately have feeling of community and support from peers proved to be incredibly valuable in sustaining volunteer efforts over time.

Schwartz (1993) makes an interesting case for altruism. He argues against the perception that true altruism does not exist, but rather is pervasive in our society. Schwartz presents research that demonstrates the capacities for empathy and sympathetic behavior that is manifested in very young children. Similarly to Clary and Miller (1986) he finds that the altruistic behavior is instilled early on from a person's experience with their parents. Schwartz demonstrates how societal influences of an egoistical society can diminish our capacity for true altruism. He argues that the assumption of underlying egoism in every altruistic behavior is counter-intuitive. People's concern for fairness and justice directly contradicts the logic of egoism.

In a later study Davis et al. (2003) found that minimizing distress was the most significant factor in increasing satisfaction. The study consisted of 238 individuals who

had recently begun volunteering with nine different organizations in the Florida area. Each participant filled out a written questionnaire during their initial training. Then over the course of the next twelve months they conducted brief follow up interviews over the phone. When the person couldn't be reached by phone, they mailed a written follow up questionnaire. The initial questionnaire was designed to assess their motivations for volunteering. It measured twenty-four different goals regarding all potential motivations for volunteering. The follow-ups were to understand what their personal reactions were to their experiences during their time volunteering. The final questionnaire examined the same twenty-four goals, but instead of evaluating how important those goals were to them, the respondents instead indicated how well those goals were being met by their volunteer experience. As could be expected, personal satisfaction was one of the greatest indicators of sustained volunteerism. This study found that screening volunteers based off their personalities and trying to match them to the best volunteering situation wasn't always effective. They found that the most effective approach was to focus on efficient training that prepares volunteers to deal with distressing scenarios and to put strong support structures in place for when volunteers are having a difficult time. Davis recommended that organizations be wary of placing new volunteers with little experience in potentially high distress situations such as one on one counseling.

Penner and Finkelstein (1998) researched AIDS volunteers in a panel study regarding the dispositional and structural determinants of volunteerism. Dispositional determinants were defined as intrinsic motivations and personality factors. Structural determinants were defined as extrinsic motivators and societal influences. One of their clearest findings was that length of service was not an indicator of satisfaction with the

organization. In trying to predict certain structural facets of volunteerism they did not find any significant differences between those who had lengthy service and those who were new. While Omoto and Snyder (1995) were not able to find any connection between pro-social personality characteristics and length of service, Penner and Finkelstein (1998) both predicted and found strong associations between the two. They were not however able to replicate the findings of Omoto and Snyder (1995) in discovering positive connections between self-centered motives and length of service. In 2002, Penner conducted a similar study, this time utilizing an online survey. He warns organizations against consciously or subconsciously taking volunteers for granted due to the fact that their motivation for being there is altruistic. How they experience the organization will have a great impact on their attitude. Penner discusses research regarding volunteer role identity. To retain volunteers, organizations need to work at maximizing their involvement within the organization. This sense of commitment and partnership with the organization is what develops a positive volunteer role identity. Once that identity emerges, the organization will find that their volunteers become much more active and long-term contributors (Lee et al., 1999).

## **Methodology**

This research study is focusing on what motivates people to volunteer and what can be done to increase retention and promote longevity. This exploratory study attempts to shed light on that question. Specific attention is given towards how this applies to volunteer counselors. The researcher collected qualitative data by conducting semi-structured interviews with volunteers who work specifically in individual counseling.

### **Sample**

The sample consists of volunteers who give their time without direct compensation, financial or otherwise. Those included in the sample have volunteered specifically in the area of individual counseling services. They have engaged in this service for a minimum of three months with one specific organization. The length of service of the participants in this sample ranged from one year to ten years. To maintain the volunteer nature of those who make up the sample, participants were not officially licensed as a mental health professional at the time of their volunteer service. This is a non-probability sample that was obtained from a counseling program, which is run by a church in Minnesota. The program provides extensive training to its volunteer counselors and allows them to provide counseling in a one on one setting to members of the community who do not have insurance or access to a professional therapist. The sample size consists of six respondents.

## **Data Collection**

The researcher met with the director of the program to obtain approval for the study. The director then mailed potential participants a handout informing them of the opportunity to participate in this research (see appendix A). The handout makes very clear who is conducting the research, what the purpose is, who qualifies to participate and what will be asked of those who agree to get involved. It also assures them that all information they reveal as well as their identity will be kept completely confidential.

Data was collected in one on one, personal interviews over the phone. Before the interview began, the researcher and participant signed a consent form that ensures confidentiality (Appendix C). The researcher made an audio recording of the interview and a full written transcript after each interview was completed.

## **Measurement**

The researcher utilized a semi-structured questionnaire. It consisted of ten questions (Appendix B). The questions inquired into what initially motivated the respondent to volunteer. It then moved on to how their expectations have been met and also how they have failed to be met. The respondents were asked to highlight both the most rewarding and the most challenging aspects of their experience as a volunteer. The respondents were asked about how long they have been volunteering with this organization. Finally they were asked to reflect on how they saw their future in this role.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix B) before participating in the interview. Their identity will remain completely anonymous and all personal information will be completely confidential. Audio recordings were made of each interview on the researcher's password protected laptop computer. The researcher utilized the recordings to type up written transcripts of each interview. Any identifying or personal information was censored from the transcript. Once the transcripts were completed the researcher deleted the audio recordings from his computer entirely. The researcher conducted all interviews over the phone in order to assure privacy and anonymity for those that chose to participate in the research.

**Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts were cross-referenced and analyzed to find common themes present in the data. Themes in the data were analyzed in light of previous research findings in the literature review. The findings will be discussed in regards to implications for practice and future research.

## Findings

Among the most prevalent themes that were discussed by the study's subjects were: 1) being motivated for the right reasons, 2) having a natural ability/aptitude for counseling, 3) dealing with their own personal issues, 4) understanding expectations, 5) commitment to continued education and learning.

## Motivations

Participants were asked what it was that initially motivated them to volunteer as a counselor. Of the 6 participants, 4 (66%) felt that volunteer counseling was a good fit in the sense that they had the skill set, experience or natural aptitude to do well in a volunteer counselor role. One participant said "...my initial motivation to get into volunteering because I had the skills, I had the resources, I had the heart and desire, so that was a good match...". Another recalled that "I think probably as far back as I can remember, I enjoyed and got energy and life from helping people...I felt like it was in my personality and interests". Another participant stated that, "I think I recognized that that's something that I'm good at, from interactions with friends, and ways that I ended up kind of doing that in my normal life, it comes kind of natural to me and I enjoy it so it seemed like a good way to serve at the church".

Participants mentioned several other motivational factors as a reason for volunteering as a counselor. Two participants (33%) mentioned their faith and felt like God was guiding them in that direction, "tithing my time was one of the ways that I felt led to give back". One participant was highly motivated to participate in volunteer counseling because she was able to do the training with her spouse and they were able to

jointly counsel other couples. Another participant noted that there were people in her life that had identified this as a potential fit and were encouraging her to participate in this service. One participant mentioned that the recruitment effort of the church motivated her to participate as a volunteer counselor. This recruitment effort is referred to as a “spotlight” where they take time during the weekend services to highlight the program and encourage applicants. In answering what motivated them to volunteer, one participant only mentioned that it was the opportunity to learn and participate in the quality training of the program.

### **Expectations**

Research participants were asked to describe their expectations of the volunteer counselor role. Four (66%) of the participants referenced the logistics of the role, regarding the training, how many clients they would be seeing, etc. One participant said her expectations were unrealistic, “I was surprised at the level of difficulty of some of the things that I would be dealing with and that was different than what I imagined.” Conversely, another participant noted that her expectations were very realistic and that she understood exactly what she was getting into. Another participant said that his only expectation was to learn and that the training program really helped him to set his expectations and understanding of what the actual counseling would be like.

Participants were asked to identify how their experiences had differed from their expectations. Four (66%) participants noted how this had impacted their own personal life. Two (33%) participants talked about being surprised at how the training had practical application to all parts of their lives. Two other participants specifically used the

term “personal growth”. One participant explained it like this, “that’s something that I wasn’t even expecting that it helped me a lot to grow and then I was wanting to share that with other people, that was something that I wasn’t expecting, to get that training that opened my eyes to new things because I didn’t have any idea that they would counsel me”. One participant discussed how this experience equipped them to make it through a very difficult time in her family’s life.

One participant discussed how unexpectedly challenging her experience has been, “I think its been different in terms of the kinds of people I thought I would be seeing and the kinds of issues I thought I would be dealing with. I think its been a lot more complex than I imagined it would be, a lot more personally challenging than I imagined it would be”. Another participant said he didn’t really find anything about the experience to be surprising due to the fact that the training was so clear about expectations. One participant indicated that she had expected there to be more “overlap” and interactions with other counselors in the program.

## **Rewards**

Participants were asked to discuss rewarding experiences during their time as a volunteer counselor. Six (100%) participants discussed how rewarding it is to see the difference it makes in people’s lives. One participant said, “Overall I continue to be awed and amazed as I am allowed to journey with people through their healing and watch their perspectives of themselves and their understanding and experience of God change, I think that is incredibly humbling and incredibly rewarding and extremely exciting to me to watch that happen.” Similarly another participant said, “I think what’s been most

rewarding is when I see people just really...get it. And I mean its such a privilege to see a life turn a corner and to get to participate in that.”

Two (33%) participants discussed specific experiences with a particular client that stood out to them, “this individual articulated that for the first time in her entire life she saw hope for her future, and as sad as that was to me....it was also quite humbling and exhilarating to see that I had somehow been used to clear the darkness so that she could see light in her future.” The other participant discussed how she had a frustrating, challenging experience with a client who years later returned to share the impact it had on their life. This participant discussed how the true impact isn’t often seen until further down the road, “a lot of times you don’t get to see all of the fullness of the impact that you’ve had, and that helps me to hang in there when things get really difficult....I’ve gotten to get feedback from people over the years because I’ve been involved for so long and worked with so many people, I’ve gotten to see or hear from them the importance of the work that I’m doing and the fact that it really made a difference for them, so that’s just more then I could have ever hoped for.” Four (66%) participants made reference to personal feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment that this experience brought them. One said, “that’s the beauty, that even though you’re not expecting anything back, just the feeling of seeing other people and in the case of counseling, healing or getting to move on with their life and getting to a new level, that gives you such a satisfaction that goes beyond something you actually get paid...”. One participant discussed the benefits of the community that she has entered into as a part of this program and also how it has been foundational experience in moving her career forward.

## Challenges

Participants were asked to shed light on what they have found to be the most challenging aspects of their experience as a volunteer counselor. Two (33%) participants used the words “fear” and “scary”, citing their concerns about being taken seriously by clients in their non-professional status. Also noted was carrying the burden of doing no harm, realizing that the stakes are very high for their clients. Two (33%) participants talked about difficult clients who are “counselor hoppers” and had been through many therapists. Two (33%) other participants talked about the challenges of working with unwilling clients specifically in the case of couples counseling, where one partner is invested in the therapy and the other one is not. One participant described their challenges by stating, “...and so I guess that unwillingness of those clients to step into the process, I felt like I was working a whole lot harder than the client was, the unwilling client. So that was the most challenging part.”. That same participant while discussing challenges went on to say that she was disappointed with her number of clients. She felt that herself as well as other counselors in the program have a lot to offer, but are being under-utilized, “I would say that at least 50% of the time, I don’t have clients, and I have noticed that lots of the other counselors that don’t have clients as well, and I don’t understand that, there seems to be a huge need out there and I don’t know what’s happening, but it doesn’t make sense to me.”

Two (33%) participants discussed the challenge of setting aside their thoughts and agenda to really listen to the client and allow them the space to tell their story. One said, “what I’ve found challenging is when a client struggles to communicate what they might be feeling and thinking...the client is just all over the place and I can’t really grab hold

of what it is the...and then learning how to or trying to navigate that situation, not shut them down, allow them to speak, but how to steer the conversation more in a direction that can be more fruitful”. The other participant explained it this way, “when you first get a client’s story about what’s going on with them for me at least you have a lot of things going on in your head, a lot of ideas and a lot of you know you want to get this information and to be the most helpful and you know being able to set all of that aside and to just really listen to the client, is very challenging.”.

Two (33%) participants talked about the challenges of having to “deal with their own stuff”. They indicated that through the training and the counseling process you have to come face to face with your own issues before you can truly help a client. Two (33%) participants talked about dealing with how they feel invested in the client’s poor choices and the challenges of releasing that without allowing it to be burdensome.

## **Training**

Participants were asked to describe what they found to be the most helpful aspects of the training process. Three (50%) subjects had participated in what is the current 9-month training program, the other 3 (50%) subjects had participated in other separate trainings but had direct knowledge and experience with the current training program.

Three (50%) of the participants said the strength of the training is the practical nature and the opportunity to experience actually practicing the theory and techniques being taught. Two (33%) participants also made statements equating the training to a Master’s level program, “I think we’ve had a lot of people actually quite a few who volunteer at the program and go on to college to become counselors and so they go on to

graduate school and they have come back and commented that they feel like our program actually does a better job of preparing you to sit down in front of a client than their graduate program”.

One (17%) participant was impressed by how she was treated as a professional not just a volunteer. One (17%) participant talked about how it gave him a new perspective on human behavior, “So learning about the how, how we do things, how our brain is involved in that, has been incredibly enlightening.”. Another participant noted how the training increased her self-awareness, “I think one of the most beneficial aspects of the training is the opportunity to increase awareness of our own issues and our own contributions and our perspectives that we bring into any relationship and especially any healing relationship or any counseling dynamic. I think that is incredibly helpful, I think all counselors should go through that.”

### **Changes**

Participants were asked what improvements or positive changes they would like to see in the program. Three (50%) participants said they feel that the program is being under-utilized and that they would like to see more people have access to it. One participant said, “I’d like it to be more accessible to people, I’d like to see the counselors fully utilized, I see them volunteering and we show up for consultation but we don’t have clients”. Another participant suggested that, “They can open the doors to other people that’s what I want to see happening because they have such really good services there that many people can benefit from the community and they don’t know that its going on there.”

## **Advice**

Participants were asked what advice they would give to a person who was considering serving as a volunteer counselor. Three (50%) participants advised that people consider the large time commitment. Three (50%) participants talked about considering the emotional toll and difficulty in dealing with serious client issues, “I also caution them to examine some of the unrealistic expectations that they may have about what it means to be a lay counselor, I think that some people just imagine that this is fairly simple work and that’s its just all sunshine and roses and the truth is that sometimes its really, really hard.”. Three (50%) of the participants also talked about how people need to have the right motivations and not be seeking this training for personal reasons, “I would advise them to really take into consideration what it means to do this in terms of their life, they are going to get triggered, its going to be emotional work...I think they need to really examine their motivation for it in terms of, I think some people do this, go through the training because they kind of deep down are desperate for some help or are thinking of a family member or maybe their husband or wife or child that they want to help, and they are hoping for some information from this course that will help them to do that and you know for things like that its better to get counseling then to be trained as a counselor.”. One participant said on a different note, that she would encourage someone to take part in the training just for the personal benefits alone even if they never actually served as a counselor. One participant said his main advice to any potential volunteer counselor was that it is essential that they have been through therapy themselves first before taking on a role like this, “the experience of sitting with a counselor and learning

to be vulnerable I would think is important, versus someone who has never done that before and then walks into the counselor role, but never having experienced that on the other end I would think it could be very helpful and keep one humble to have been in the position to do what they are now asking another person to do, such as bare their soul, to trust, to be honest, that kind of thing, I would think its very important for a counselor have been through that themselves. Having walked the walk is how I would put it.” One participant highlighted the importance of self-care and “being good to yourself”.

### **Shaping the Future**

Participants were asked how their experience as a volunteer counselor had shaped them presently and in regards to their future. Six (100%) participants either had already obtained further formal counseling training or indicated that they had plans to become a professional counselor, social worker, or therapist as a result of having participated in this program, “getting into the volunteer counseling has actually motivated me to go to college....and part of why I am going to college now, is eventually the goal is a masters in marriage and family therapy so that I can do this full time, so that I can give my life to this so to speak, so that’s the impact of that on me.”. Another participant talked about it as a foundational experience for her career, “I think that it has well truly its got my feet wet as far as what counseling and therapy is, and it really grounded me in what good, spiritually based therapy can look like. And I think that will always be something that has shaped where I have gone from there, it’s the foundation that I’ve built on. So this experience as a lay counselor has been the foundation that I’ve built my career on.”

Three (50%) participants discussed how it had impacted and shaped their personal lives, “I know that it has changed me in ways that I cant even measure in terms even my own personal growth to navigate through my own life and relationships I think just the exposure to this material, you can’t help but it impact your regular life, your life outside your role as a counselor and even just the way that you think about problems the way you think about growth changes as a result of that work.” Two (33%) participants indicated that they were planning on staying with the program as long as there was an opportunity and a need.

## Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, Clary and Snyder (1999) identify 6 motivational functions that are served by volunteering. They are labeled as values, enhancement, understanding, career, social, and protective. In this study, 100% of participants indicated that one or more of those factors lead them to volunteer as a counselor. This study's findings were consistent with those of Clary and Snyder (1999) and Omoto and Snyder (2002) in that each subject's motivations were multi-faceted and complex. The participant's motives could not simply be categorized as altruistic or egoistic, both motivational functions were expressed from the same subject. Several participants indicated that they were motivated to give back to the community and their greatest rewards were in seeing the difference it made in the lives of others. However, these same participants were quick to point out how their experience as a volunteer counselor had been a stepping-stone or launching pad for their personal careers. Another theme was the volunteer counselors own growth and development in their personal lives. This study would seem to support the argument that egoistic and altruistic motivations are not mutually exclusive.

The study also concurred with the findings of Davis (1999) who emphasized that organizations need to stay away from the "one size fits all" approach to volunteer recruitment and focus on matching volunteers with work that matches their capacity for empathy and ability to cope with stress. Several participants discussed the stressful nature of this work and how their ability to be patient and empathic with resistant clients was constantly being challenged. Participants in this study emphasized that potential

volunteers be fully presented with just how challenging and overwhelming volunteer counseling can be at times. Participants discussed having to adjust their expectations and manage the stress of taking responsibility for clients with significant mental health issues. To be noted however is how each of those same participants also discussed the rewards and satisfaction that ultimately came from having gone through those challenges.

Grube and Piliavin (2000) found that developing a strong volunteer role identity and having feelings of status or importance within the organizations were key contributors to longevity among volunteers. This study validates that notion in that participants really seemed to have embraced and attached themselves to the role of volunteer counselor. Some participants were motivated to volunteer as counselors due to the fact that they already saw that role as part of their identity, while conversely others because of their volunteer counselor experience quickly took on that role as a part of their identity. Along the same lines, Omoto and Snyder (2002) found that feelings of connectedness and community within the organization are positively related to longevity with that organization. This applies to the participants of this study in a unique way because the program in which they volunteer exists and functions within the context of a specific church community. So their feelings of importance or connectedness to the community are taking place in a greater context than just the specific counseling program.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size of 6 participants makes this study difficult to generalize the findings to the public in general, however the themes found among the participants

provides a solid foundation to discuss implications for improving the volunteer counselor experience. It is also difficult to compare the findings of this study to past literature because very little research has focused on the unique experiences of volunteer counselors. However the findings are compared with current literature to find common implications for social work practice.

Another consideration while discussing the findings is that 100% of the participants indicated a very high level of satisfaction in their role as a volunteer counselor as well as a strong desire to continue in that role into the future. In the majority of similar research on the experiences of volunteers, data is stratified between those who have positive experiences and intend to continue and those whose experiences were negative and do not intend to continue volunteering. In this study the entire sample consisted of the former, thus limiting the implications to be drawn from the data.

### **Implications for Practice**

Participants in this study are engaged in very demanding and highly stressful work. To be qualified to participate in this work, they took on what participants referred to as a professional level training that required a 9-month commitment. That is a lot of time and energy that these participants freely sacrifice. The study would validate the findings of Penner (2002) who found that in order to retain volunteers, organizations need to work to maximize their involvement. Social work organizations can't shy away from increasing expectations of volunteers. It seems a fear of over-burdening busy individuals who are freely donating their time can come in to play. However previous research, as well as this current study, are finding that increased demands on volunteers will only

serve to increase their sense of ownership and level of satisfaction. Participants in this study were overwhelming positive about their experiences as volunteer counselors. Most negative feedback that was received was not due to feeling overwhelmed or burdened by the high expectations of the position. Interestingly, negative feedback was in regards to not receiving enough responsibility in terms of the number of clients seen. Also noted was a frustration that the program wasn't expanding to reach more people. So even in a demanding volunteer position such as this, it seems that there was a desire for more responsibility and not less.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As previously noted, there is a large gap in the literature concerning the specific experiences of volunteer counselors. A replication of this study with a much larger sample size could prove to be very beneficial. The ability to compare and contrast experiences of volunteer counselors within the same organizational context, while having a sample that consists of both satisfied and dissatisfied volunteers would shed much needed light on what truly factors into increasing retention rates.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment letter to potential participants

Dear Sir or Madam,

You are invited to participate in exciting new research being conducted in conjunction with the School of Social Work, a joint program at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. The aim of this research is to better understand the experience of volunteer counselors and find ways to improve it. This research will take place through one on one Interview that will last approximately 20-30 minutes. Participants will be asked questions about what initially motivated them to serve as a volunteer counselor, and also what they find to be the greatest rewards and challenges of the experience up to this point.

Participation is completely voluntary. Your participation or lack thereof will not be communicated to anyone. The identities of those who participate, and the information shared will be kept completely confidential. Interviews can be conducted in person or over the phone at a time convenient for yourself. Anyone interested in participating or who has further questions about the research is invited to contact the researcher, Daniel Bubna at the following email address or phone number:

Thank you for your time.

Daniel Bubna

## **Appendix B**

### Interview Questionnaire

Tell me about your experience as a volunteer counselor. Where? How long? etc.

What was it that initially motivated you to volunteer as a counselor?

What were your expectations of what this role would be like?

Tell me about a rewarding experience you've had as a volunteer counselor

How has this experience been different than you thought it would be?

Tell me about a challenging experience you encountered as a volunteer counselor

What were the most helpful parts of your training?

What are some positive changes that would like to see happen?

What advice would you give someone considering volunteering in this capacity?

What are your hopes and plans for your future in this role?

## **Appendix C**

### **Consent Form Institutional Review Board University of St. Thomas**

#### **IRB# 312770-1 Motivations of Volunteers: factors that promote longevity**

This is a research project being conducted by Daniel Bubna, a graduate student working in conjunction with the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. The study will examine the motivations and experiences of volunteer counselors. You were selected as a potential participant for this study because you have experience as volunteer counselor. This study is being conducted by Daniel Bubna, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and chaired by Dr. Colin Hollidge.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivations of volunteers and how that impacts their experiences. The study aims to identify factors that can help organizations improve the volunteer experience and increase retention rates.

#### **Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a single one on one interview with the researcher, either face to face or over the phone. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. The researcher will make an audio recording of the interview.

#### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

A risk is that sensitive or emotional topics or experiences may come up during the course of the interview. A benefit is the opportunity to contribute to the body of research and knowledge on this topic

#### **Compensation**

No direct compensation will be provided.

#### **Confidentiality**

Only the researcher, Daniel Bubna, will have access to the records of this interview. All personal and identifying information will be censored and the audio recording will be deleted no later than May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating agencies or institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until the date/time specified in this study. You are free

to skip any questions that may be asked. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will NOT be used in the study.

### **Contacts and Questions**

You may contact any of the resources listed below with any questions or concerns about this study:

Researcher name: Daniel Bubna  
Researcher email: bubn3371@stthomas.edu  
Researcher phone: 612-239-XXXX  
Research Advisor name: Colin Hollidge  
Research Advisor email: cfhollidge@stthomas.edu  
Research Advisor phone: 651-962-5818  
UST IRB Office: 651-962-5341

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I am at least 18 years old. I consent to participate in this study. By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I give my full consent to participate in this study.

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**Signature of Study Participant**

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**Date**

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**Print Name of Study Participant**

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**Signature of Researcher**

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**Date**