MILLENNIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS AND VOLUNTEERING:
THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND PERCEIVED OBSTACLES

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MILLENNIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS AND VOLUNTEERING:
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ABSTRACT

Because volunteers are the lifeblood of nonprofit organizations, it is important to understand a new generation of volunteers that will help sustain these organizations: millennial college students. Using the Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework, this research explored the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that encourage millennial college student volunteerism. Furthermore, the obstacles that prevent volunteerism were also examined. Qualitative in-depth interviews with eleven millennial college students revealed six motivations that drive volunteerism: 1) the desire to feel comfortable and wanting to know what to expect from a volunteer experience 2) a balance of task enjoyment with other factors that contribute to an overall positive volunteer experience 3) the satisfaction of seeing results from the volunteer labor 4) challenges that lead to a transformative experience 5) experiencing warm-glow 6) feeling of gratitude. Next, the data revealed the obstacles that discourage volunteering: lack of time and lack of structure. Nonprofit managers can use insights found in this research study to create more effective strategies for attracting, recruiting and retaining millennial college students.
Introduction

Nonprofit organizations face the ongoing challenge of attracting, recruiting and retaining volunteers to carry out the organization’s mission. Volunteer labor is the lifeblood of a nonprofit, and yet it is often in short supply; in fact, only one-third of the US population volunteers for a nonprofit organization (Sundeen, Raskoff & Garcia, 2007). Of this population, millennial college students represent a valuable group of volunteers. To engage and keep this demographic, nonprofit organizations must distinguish between elements that facilitate positive emotions and elements that may lead to a negative volunteer experience. Identifying antecedents and consequences of volunteerism among millennial college students will help nonprofit organizations create more effective communication strategies to reach this demographic. The purpose of this research is to examine the motivations behind millennial college students’ prosocial behavior and explore the perceived obstacles they encounter when volunteering.
Value of College Students

The Corporate for National and Community Service, America’s largest grantmaker for service and volunteering, cites that 26.3 percent of college students (ages 16–24) volunteered for a nonprofit organization in 2010 (CNCS, 2010). While some researchers believe college students are among the most active group of volunteers (Lee & Won, 2011) other researchers contend that the rate of young adult volunteers is decreasing (Francis, 2011; Smith, 1999). Bussell and Forbes (2002) suggest that the number of volunteers has remained steady, but the number of volunteer opportunities has grown, thus making resources scarce for nonprofits. Despite scarce research on college students in terms of volunteerism (Francis, 2011), this demographic is of great importance to nonprofit organizations due to college students’ “positive energy,” technological savviness, networking, access to university resources and time-flexibility (Aschenbrener, 2010) (Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007). Furthermore, college students are particularly valuable because higher education is a predictor of sustained volunteerism (Sundeen & Raskoff as cited in Wilson, 2000).

Millennials

At the time of this research, college students are a part of the millennial generation. Millennials are those born between 1982 and 2000 a represent over 30 percent of the population (Paulin, Ferguson, Jost & Fallu, 2014). While college students represent only a small number of the entire millennial generation, it is still important to look at the values of this generation. Researchers disagree about millennials’ prosocial
behavior. Twenge, Campbell and Freeman (2012) attest that narcissism and emphasis on image classifies millennials as “Generation Me.” In contrast, Arnett (2013) describes the millennial generation as benevolent and “holds great promise for improving the world.” Similarly, an AP-Gfkg poll revealed people under 30 say citizens are more likely to volunteer than past generations. In fact, the number adult volunteers under the age of 30 has risen seven percent, from 1989 to 2013 (Cass, 2014).

Millennials’ digital expertise sets them apart from previous generations (Fine, 2008). Therefore, nonprofit organizations are now offering virtual volunteering opportunities to cater to millennials’ online savviness (Ellis, 2012). For example, the United Nations Online Volunteering Project matches the skills of the volunteer, such as translating or researching, with volunteering opportunities around the world (UN Volunteers). Organizations may see the benefit of incorporating virtual volunteering to appeal to the tech-savvy millennials.

The millennial generation presents new challenges for nonprofit organizations. This generation subscribes to the missions of nonprofit organizations but do not subscribe to the organizations themselves (The Millennial Impact Project, 2013). For example, an individual could be moved to volunteer for the American Red Cross during Hurricane Sandy, but may no longer affiliate with the organization after the crisis is over. Likewise, a millennial may see himself as “spiritual” but is not involved with any particular religious institution (ter Kuile, & Thurston, 2015). Support from millennials will heavily influence a nonprofit’s survival, so organizations must learn how to overcome this generation’s opposition to affiliating with institutions.

Nonprofits may struggle to first attract these wavering millennials, but keeping
them in the organization is yet another challenge. Organizational commitment can be defined as “a strong, emotional identification with a concrete organization, manifested by the belief and acceptance of its goals and values, a willingness to make efforts for the organization, and a desire to continue as a member” (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002 as cited in Vecina, Chacón, Marzana, & Marta, 2013 p. 292). Research shows, however, that millennials do not have a commitment to an organization, but instead have an attachment to particular causes (The Millennial Impact Project, 2013). Not surprisingly, an increased commitment to an organization increased a volunteer’s intention to remain with that particular organization (Marta, Pozzi & Marzana, 2010). Therefore, in order to retain volunteers, it is imperative for nonprofit organizations to harness these unaffiliated millennials drifting from organization to organization.

**Motivations That Drive Volunteering**

Preceding literature establishes that millennial college students are a valuable demographic for nonprofit organizations. Therefore, it is critical to understand the motivations that drive this demographic to volunteer. A widely-used model for examining volunteer motivations is Clary et al.’s Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (1998). This model, which applies functionalist theory to volunteer motivations, identifies six motives for volunteering:

- Values: altruism, concern for others
- Understanding: new learning experiences
- Social: developing relationships with others
- Career: enhancing career-related benefits
• Protective: protect the ego from negative feelings
• Enhancement: expand positive aspects of the ego

The use of VFI has been widely used to examine motivations of different demographics including college students (Gage & Thapa, 2012) and retirees (Brayley et al., 2013). It is evident that the VFI is a popular model to examine volunteer motivations; over 200 journal articles cite using VFI to examine motivations (Francis, 2011). However, because Clary et al. collected data prior to 1997, Francis (2011) questions the relevancy of the VFI for today’s contemporary college students. Furthermore, she argues that the VFI does not give adequate consideration to the importance of reference groups. Reference groups include family members and peers that have influence on one’s behavior (Childers, 1992). Because the current study expects to find that reference groups are of great importance to millennial college students, VFI may not be a suitable model for this research.

**Personal Benefits of Volunteering**

Volunteer activities that benefit the self, or “me-oriented” volunteer activities (Briggs et al, 2010), include career benefits and résumé building, social interaction in one’s own community, and expression of moral principles (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2008). A 1996 survey revealed that volunteer and charity work was the second greatest impact on one’s happiness (Argye 1996, as cited in Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 1999). Furthermore, 67 percent of respondents reported that the “satisfaction of seeing results” was “very important” and 48 percent reported meeting friends was “very important.” The personal benefits millennial college students receive from volunteering will likely be a motivation for sustained volunteerism.
Obstacles

New trends in volunteering present new obstacles for nonprofit organizations.

**Slacktivism.**

Slacktivism refers to small, seemingly insignificant actions taken on social media in the forms of “likes” or “shares” on behalf of a cause (Morozov, 2010 as cited in Fatkin & Lansdown, 2015 p. 581). Critics claim that these activities require little effort or thought and do nothing to advance the cause but instead only benefit the individual by creating a feeling of “warm-glow,” or the positive feelings an individual gets from behaving pro-socially (Andreoni, 1990). This illusion of advancing a cause through social media is a possible obstacle to real life activism that occurs through volunteering through specific nonprofit organizations. However, some proponents argue that slacktivism actually *does* create visibility for the cause, and on a large scale and for low cost (Coleman, S., & Blumler, J.G., 2009, as cited in Fatkin & Lansdown, 2015). For example, the ALS ice bucket challenge—the social-media driven challenge in which participants dump ice cold water on their heads and encourage others to donate to ALS research—generated $100 million in donations in thirty days (The ALS Association, 2014). While the new age of slacktivism may threaten volunteerism in the traditional sense, it may actually provide new opportunities to meet the prosocial behaviors of a new generation.

**Global connectivity.**

In the past, volunteering was limited to mostly local opportunities. However, the Internet now allows people to virtually reach around the globe to help someone in need. Many may feel that helping the less fortunate thousands of miles away will make a bigger
impact than contributing to a local cause. Because the internet allows anyone to support charities around the world, our community has expanded globally but has shrunk locally. Ter Kuile and Thurston (2015) illustrate the consequence of this global virtual connectivity: “…an American millennial feels more comfortable setting up a Kiva loan to a farmer in Kenya than bringing chicken soup to a neighbor” (pg. 3). Furthermore, the internet allows people to frequently switch causes that we choose to support. What seems like a positive—instant connectivity to global issues—in fact presents an obstacle for nonprofits trying retain loyal volunteers.

These trends in volunteering, if ignored, can be potential obstacles for nonprofit organizations in engaging and retaining millennial volunteers. However, nonprofits must be receptive to these changes and capitalize on them to attract millennial volunteers.

**Time constraints.**

Lack of time is often cited as the number one barrier to volunteering (Sundeen, Raskoff & Garcia, 2007). Today, many feel time deprived due to commitments to work, family and friends. Because of society’s perceived lack of time, “episodic” volunteering is becoming increasingly common (Hustinx & Handy, 2009). The trend of single days of service and micro-volunteering has emerged to satiate society’s lack of time but desire to do good (Ellis, 2012). Single days of service allow people to volunteer for a few hours with no commitment to an organization. An example is Make a Difference Day, where volunteers nationwide partake in clean up or reconstruction projects for one day only. Micro-volunteering is service done in 30 minutes or fewer, most often completed via smart phone, such as Skills for Change, which allows people to do mini professional volunteer projects like editing and design for nonprofits.
Millennials resist set schedules and pre-defined volunteer roles; short-term assignments satisfy this generation’s desire to volunteer without being locked into a commitment (Ellis, 2012). Many organizations are embracing the concept of flexible volunteer scheduling to appeal to time-depraved college students (Lee & Won, 2011). In contrast to traditional fixed scheduling, flexible scheduling allows people to volunteer at their convenience, with no pre-determined time schedule. Nonprofit organizations that do not provide episodic volunteer opportunities and flexible scheduling risk pushing away millennial college students.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Social marketing.**

*Social marketing* is the integration of traditional marketing concepts to benefit the greater good (Andreasen, 2002). As far back as the early 1950’s, when commercial marketing dominated the industry, people were advocating for social marketing. Proponent Gerhard Weibe asked, “Why can’t you sell brotherhood like you can soap?” (as cited in Manrai & Gardner, 1992 p. 15). Decades later, marketers are still struggling to answer this question. Kotler and Zaltman (1971) first defined social marketing as the creation of programs with the goal of “increasing the acceptability of social ideas.” This accepted definition persisted for years until Andreasen questioned its legitimacy. He argues that the objective of social marketing is not to persuade the target audience to merely accept an idea, but rather to get the target audience to change a behavior (Andreasen, 2002). In order to change a behavior, the first step is to focus on understanding the target audience, their “wants and needs, aspirations, lifestyles, freedom of choice” (Lefebvre, 2011 p. 58).
While past research on social marketing has focused on marketing social ideas to external audiences (e.g. smokers as the target for an anti-tobacco campaign,) the same principles of social marketing can be applied to internal audiences of volunteers in nonprofit organizations. Social marketing is the application of traditional marketing techniques in order to benefit the greater good; therefore, these same techniques can be used to attract, recruit and retain millennial college student volunteers.

**Self-Determination Theory.**

Although the Volunteer Functions Inventory is a popular model for examining volunteer motivations, the literature raised concerns about the relevancy of VFI for today’s contemporary college students. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is common among academic research but scarce in volunteerism research (Bidee et. al, 2013). Until the present research, the SDT has not been used to examine volunteer motivations of college students

Ryan and Deci (2000a) attest to why the study of motivation is so important: motivation elicits action. Therefore, nonprofit managers would greatly benefit from understanding the motivations that encourage college students to take action to volunteer. Research for the current study will be guided by the Self-Determination Theory to discover the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive college student volunteering.

According to the SDT, motivations stem from the degree to which three innate psychological needs are met: autonomy, relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Ryan and Deci (2000b), autonomy refers to the ability to choose one’s own behavior, relatedness is the desire to be a part of a social group, and competence is the desire to feel effective. The SDT separates the motivations that drive
individuals to seek out these innate needs into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as performing an activity for its inherent enjoyment or challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). For example, a student who does her homework for pure enjoyment and interest in the topic is intrinsically motivated. In contrast, an individual who is extrinsically motivated performs an activity to gain an outcome that is separable from the activity. A student who does her homework in order to graduate is extrinsically motivated by the fear of the consequences of not graduating (Ryan & Deci 2000a). While young children generally behave out of enjoyment of a task, these intrinsic motivations diminish with age as social pressures to behave certain ways increase, and motivations therefore become extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

In contrast to the inherent enjoyment that comes from intrinsic motivations, extrinsic motivations encourage activities that are done to attain a separable outcome. Extrinsic motivations can be divided into external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation.

*External regulation* is a form of extrinsic motivation that occurs when the individual’s goal is to receive an external reward or to avoid punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). For example, an individual who volunteers to receive praise from others is performing with external regulation. Next, *introjected regulation* refers to a motivation that is driven by the desire to overcome guilt or anxiety (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Someone who is motivated to volunteer because she feels guilty of her privilege is doing so through introjected regulation. An activity is *identified regulated* if the individual has a personal stake in the activity. For example, an individual may feel motivated to donate blood because a relative received blood after a traumatic injury. Last, an activity
regulated through integrated motivation will bring “harmony or coherence” with other aspects of the individual’s identity (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). An individual who volunteers because it allows him to reach other important life values is extrinsically motivated (Bidee et al., 2013).

**Grounded Theory.**

In addition to the guiding theories of social marketing and the Self-Determination Theory, the element of discovery is an important aspect of this research, i.e., the ability to uncover motivations and obstacles to volunteering among millennial college students. Therefore, this research allows for a grounded theoretical approach, to uncover individual experiences that may exist among millennial college students with regard to their motivations for volunteering with nonprofit organizations (Charmaz, 2001). Through grounded theory, the theory is not predetermined, but rather is discovered through data analysis. It is through this careful analysis that themes become apparent to the researcher (Charamaz, 2001). Themes that describe the motivations that encourage millennial college student volunteerism and the obstacles that discourage it emerged through the exploratory nature of grounded theory method.

**Research Questions**

The literature reveals that the volunteer landscape is changing and millennial college students expect a different experience than previous generations. The purpose of the present research is to discover the motivations that encourage and obstacles that discourage millennial college students from volunteering with a nonprofit organization. The preceding theoretical assumptions and review of the literature led to the following research questions:
RQ1a: What are millennial college students’ intrinsic motivations for volunteering with nonprofit organizations?

RQ1b: What are millennial college students’ extrinsic motivations for volunteering with nonprofit organizations?

RQ2: What are the perceived obstacles millennial college students encounter when volunteering for a nonprofit organization?
Methodology

Literature describing motivation and volunteerism is mostly limited to quantitative research methods such as surveys conducted using the Volunteer Functions Inventory. To examine millennial college students’ motivations for volunteering, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. According to Fontana and Fray (1994), interviewing is one of the most “powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 361). While traditional survey methods may only scratch the surface of human emotions, in-depth interviews revealed a “wealth of detail” concerning respondents’ motivations, values and emotions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Furthermore, in-depth qualitative interviewing was suitable for grounded theory because, compared to other research methods, the interviewer had more control over the creation of data (Charmaz, 2001). In contrast to other qualitative methods, grounded theory allowed for the researcher to begin analyzing data from the initial phase of research. This difference is important because it describes how relevant data built off each other to guide each subsequent interview (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A small sample size and limited geography makes it difficult to make a generalization about the entire population (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). However, a small number of semi-structured in-depth interviews provided rich data of “greater breadth” than other research methods (Fontana & Fray, 1994, p. 365).

Sample

Millennials are those born between 1982 and 2000 (Paulin, Ferguson, Jost & Fallu, 2014), and many fall into the age range of typical college students. Therefore, a
convenience sample of university students was appropriate for this study. A *convenience sample* is gathered based on participants’ willingness to participate and convenience of their location (Robinson, 2014). While convenience sampling runs the risk of making generalizations of a particular population, the demographics of the target population fits the demographics of convenience sample and therefore justifies the use of this sampling method (Robinson, 2014). Participants from undergraduate journalism courses were offered extra credit to participate in this study. Ten females and one male participated in the in-depth interviews. All subjects had volunteered at least once in the past year.

**Key Concepts**

Volunteerism is defined as “long-term, planned, prosocial behaviors that benefit strangers, and usually occur in an organizational setting” (Penner, 2002). Because short-term, spontaneous activities is a recent trend in volunteering (Ellis, 2012; Hustinx & Handy, 2009) Penner’s description of traditional volunteerism as being “long-term” and “planned” is not relevant when describing volunteerism by the modern millennial. For the present research, volunteerism will be defined as prosocial, charitable behaviors that offer no tangible reward in return.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000b), intrinsic motivation is “doing an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence” (p. 56). A description of a behavior done out of pure enjoyment is intrinsically-motivated.

Extrinsic motivation, in contrast, is the desire to act because of “external prods, pressure or rewards” (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 60). A task done for personal career-enhancement is an example of an extrinsically-motivated behavior.
Data Analysis

In the qualitative data analysis, researchers used an inductive method in which data are organized into categories. From these categories, meaning emerges from the data themselves (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Unlike other data collection methods in which analysis begins only after all the data is collected, in grounded theory, data is analyzed at several points in the research process (Charmaz, 2001). In this study, data collected was categorized using an open coding technique. The purpose of open coding is to provide new insights that can be compared with data for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Findings that emerge from this data collection technique reshaped the questions asked in subsequent interviews. By forcing the researcher to make comparisons, open coding eliminates the risk of subjectivity and bias and has been shown to be a reliable data analysis technique (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

To triangulate the results and further validate the findings, constant comparative analysis technique was conducted. Constant comparative analysis technique requires the researcher to read and re-read through all the data collected to find overlapping topical areas or categories (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Data is then categorized according to these themes, allowing the researcher to find relationships between the categories. It is then up to the researcher to validate the themes by using individual quotes or paraphrases from the interviews to justify theme selection (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Thus, the constant comparative analysis calls for four steps (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003):

1. Comparative assignment of incidents to categories
2. Elaboration and refinement of categories
3. Searching for relationships and themes among categories
4. Simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure
Results

Intrinsic Motivations

Intrinsic motivations are activities that are done for their inherent enjoyment, rather than for a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). RQ1a asked: What are millennial college students’ intrinsic motivations for volunteering with nonprofit organizations? The two most common intrinsic motivations found in this research study were the following: Feeling of comfort and certainty in a volunteer activity and balancing task enjoyment with overall experience.

Feeling of comfort and certainty in a volunteer activity.

A feeling of comfort and certainty were motivations to carry out a volunteer activity, while uncomfortableness and uncertainty were an obstacle to volunteering. Participant 5 explained that college students would be more likely to volunteer if the organizations made it clear what was to be expected of its volunteers:

Participant 5: If people know what they’re getting into ahead of time, they are more willing to do it. As opposed to just showing up and saying, ‘Go do this.’ So if you know what you’re doing, you can go into it being kind of comfortable knowing what you’re going to do instead of just showing up and getting a task.

Participant 1 started to enjoy her volunteering as a public relations intern only after she became familiar and comfortable with the task: “It’s more enjoyable when I’m used to doing [the task], or have experienced doing it before. Kinda know what to expect and aren’t doing it for the first time.”
For Participant 5, the organization’s staff alleviated uncertainty and boosted confidence by thoroughly communicating what would be expected of the participant:

Participant 5: I had never [volunteered] so I didn’t know what to expect— I was a little unsure. But that was a big thing for me that [the staff] was like, ‘We’ll take you through every step.’ I went through a few trainings with them first, so it wasn’t like I was thrown into things. So that helped me feel confident doing it.

According to the SDT, relatedness is a factor that encourages motivation, and therefore developing relationships in a volunteer experience fulfills the need for relatedness. Relationship development is a separable outcome and thus an extrinsic motivation; however, this study reveals that developing relationships can also be an intrinsic motivation in order to feel comfortable and certain in an unfamiliar volunteer experience. In order to feel more comfortable, Participant 5 brought a friend to a new volunteering situation:

Participant 5: I think it’s more fun when you go with someone and you can go and share that passion with someone. I think it’s why I do way more group volunteering than I do alone. I think it makes it easier going into an unknown situation with someone. So if I go with someone to a new food bank for the first time, I’ll bring someone with me instead of just showing up…I went to the Tiger Food Bank and I brought one of my friends with me because someone posted on Facebook that they were in need of volunteers, and I felt weird going by myself.”

Similarly, Participant 9 felt that developing relationships with staff members created a comfortable volunteering environment:
Participant 9: I think it’s pretty important [to develop relationships with staff] because it helps me feel comfortable with what I’m doing and feel like I have someone to talk to if I have a problem. And they’re just a good resource. So for me, I see it that way instead of, ‘Oh, we need to be best friends.’ It’s positive to feel like I can trust them throughout the volunteering process.

The second intrinsic motivation for volunteering is a feeling of comfort and certainty in a volunteering experience. Participants were more inclined to volunteer if they felt secure and knew what to expect and less likely to volunteer if they felt insecure and did not know what to expect. Bringing friends to an unknown situation and developing relationships with staff increased the level of comfort and confidence.

**Balancing task enjoyment with overall experience.**

Participants became volunteers in one of four ways: they sought out opportunities by searching online, they were asked by a peer or family member, they were asked by someone in a leadership role (e.g. religious leader), or they were required to volunteer through a sorority or fraternity. The volunteer tasks varied from tutoring disadvantaged children to cooking meals for the homeless. The participants who sought out volunteer experiences on their own chose activities that embraced causes they were passionate about or chose tasks they inherently enjoyed doing. Participant 9 sought out volunteer opportunities based on her passion of working with children:

Participant 9: I sorted through [volunteer opportunities online] and was just thinking, “What are some things that would apply to what I like to do?” And I knew I liked working with kids. I think when I started searching, I didn’t have a real direct idea. Just something I would enjoy.
Similarly, Participant 6 chose to participate with Girls on the Run after she sought out volunteer opportunities on United Way’s online volunteer match:

Participant 6: I am really passionate about women’s issues and advocacy, so when I was home…I did Girls on the Run. I was a volunteer coach with them, so I was working with young girls in grades four through six— I wanted to keep doing something that was working with kids and young women. I just looked up some places back home and got involved with them, and I started doing childcare and stuff like that.

In contrast, participants who did not seek out opportunities but rather were asked by a leadership figure or were required by their Greek obligations often partook in tasks that were not inherently enjoyable. However, the overall positive volunteer experience superseded the mundane tasks. Participant 7 said, “I feel like you get more out of the entire process than the individual task.” Participant 8, who was required to pack food in boxes for a food pantry, did not find the actual task to be enjoyable but found that the overall experience of connecting with people surpassed the monotony of the task:

Participant 8: It was a fun couple of hours; I got to know people. It didn’t really cross my mind that it was for a purpose. It was just doing something fun, something good…. I wouldn’t say [the task] was particularly stimulating, but it was enjoyable.

When participants chose their own tasks, they were satisfying their need for autonomy, as spelled out by the Self-Determination Theory. These tasks were more likely to be inherently enjoyable and thus an intrinsic motivation for volunteering. The need for autonomy was likely not satisfied when the volunteering activity was mandatory or the
participant was not able to select the task. Therefore, the volunteering activity would need to satisfy one of the other innate psychological needs determined by the SDT.

Participant 9 describes the balance needed between task enjoyment and feeling effective:

Participant 9: It’s kind of a combination of the task and how much difference I feel like I’m making or how much good I’m doing. So those would kind of need to balance out. If I feel like I’m really making a difference, I wouldn’t mind so much if the task wasn’t enjoyable. Maybe if there’s not that big of a difference, then the task enjoyment would need to make up for it.

Task enjoyment was not necessarily important if the overall positive volunteer experience made up for the uninteresting task. A balance is needed: if the task was inherently enjoyable, other aspects of volunteering were less important. If the task was uninteresting, it was important for the volunteer to experience other positive aspects of volunteering the superseded the inherent dullness of the task.

**Extrinsic Motivations**

Despite the importance of intrinsic motivation, most activities are extrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). RQ1b asked: What are millennial college students’ extrinsic motivations for volunteering with nonprofit organizations? Extrinsic motivations are activities done to attain some separable outcome and can be classified into four categories:

1. External regulation: behaviors are performed to receive a reward or avoid punishment
2. Introjected regulation: avoiding guilt or attaining pride
3. Identified regulation: activity has a personal significance
4. Integrated regulation: brings harmony with other aspects of individual’s identity

**Satisfaction of seeing results.**

Satisfaction of seeing results from one’s volunteer labor was an important extrinsic motivation for most participants. The accomplishment of seeing results satisfies the innate need for competence, as spelled out by the Self-Determination Theory. Seeing results is obtaining an external reward, and therefore this motivation can be classified as being externally regulated. Participant 2 had a positive volunteer experience when she raised money for Relay for Life:

Participant 2: When [Relay for Life] was over, it felt like a lot of hard work had gone into it, and it wasn’t hard work for nothing. It felt nice that there’s all this money raised going to help fund cancer research.

Participant 5 said that being able to see the results of her efforts would lead to repeat volunteering:

Participant 5: I’ll go back to [the organization] for the rest of my life probably. When I can see the change I think I’m more willing to go back and not go back when I feel like I didn’t really make that much of an impact.

For many participants, seeing the gratitude from recipients of the volunteerism was an extrinsic motivation:

Participant 3: Just seeing that a meal could make such a difference was really touching to me. I felt good about what I was doing. And just to hear them say, ‘Thank you for that’ and that it meant a lot to them.

Participant 5: It’s awesome to see the gratitude of people. My first mission trip was in sixth grade. We worked at an elderly home. They were being babysat
because they had disabilities and their family couldn’t watch them. When the family members came back, they were so grateful that someone was there to spend time with them, and they didn’t just sit there. That was enough just to see that you could make a change in their life to someone who needed it.

**Embracing a challenge that resulted in a transformative experience.**

According to the Self-Determination Theory, feeling challenged satisfies one’s need for competence. This study revealed that participants did not like to feel challenged when it came to the actual volunteering task itself. Participants were intrinsically motivated by tasks that were easy and comfortable. However, participants did embrace large challenges that resulted in transformative experiences. For example, Participant 3 described her growth as a person after volunteering in a poor neighborhood of undocumented citizens:

Participant 3: It was difficult for me because there’s a lot of commentary right now about undocumented citizens. So I kind of went in not having my mind made up, but then I was challenged and shown these are people. And politics should fall to the wayside, and I was doing work to help real people. So that really challenged my line of thinking politically but opened my eyes too to new types of people and new cultures. That’s really important to me.

Participant 1 was challenged when she spoke to people who did not share her same religious beliefs: “[It was a] cultural challenge—being able to listen to people and relate to them and have the maturity to share your beliefs. I definitely grew up on that trip.” Participant 5 also embraced the challenge of being in an uncomfortable situation:
Participant 5: I went on a mission trip in Chicago and I was a freshman in high school and was totally afraid of talking to strangers…I was super uncomfortable and super challenged, but it was changed the way I have looked at volunteering because you can’t go in wanting to be comfortable for yourself because it’s not about you.

The transformative experiences are integrated regulation, which is the most autonomous type of extrinsic motivation. According to the Self-Determination Theory, integrated regulation brings harmony with other aspects of individual’s identity through self-examination.

**Experiencing “warm glow.”**

“Warm glow” is the positive feelings an individual receives from behaving pro-socially (Andreoni, 1990). Almost all participants reported the feeling of warm glow as a motivation for volunteering. Participant 11 describes the feeling:

Participant 11: Volunteerism to me is giving back to a greater cause but also it makes me feel like I’m gaining something as well, like a feeling of happiness, like a feeling I’m contributing to a greater good.

Subject 3 said, “I [volunteer] because it’s a two-way street. I feel good about doing it, but I also like seeing who it impacts.” Subject 2 reported that volunteering “makes you feel good afterwards.”

**Feeling of gratitude.**

Many participants cited that feeling grateful for their own life situation is a motivation for volunteering. Participant 10 said, “I’m thankful for the other things I’ve been blessed with and I feel the need to pay it forward a little bit. So I think volunteering
is a part of that.” Participant 3 said, “I feel that I am very blessed in my life. I haven’t been left wanting for very much in my life and so I have a lot of empathy for people that are going through [difficulties] and I want to help them out.” Participant 6 recognizes her privileges: “I feel like it’s important to recognize what privileges you have as an individual in this society and then use those and your time to serve others.” Some participants felt they should give back to society because they’ve been the recipients of help. Participant 2 recalled a time when a friend selflessly made cookies to cheer up after a bad day: “I think acts of service are important. I know I feel the most cared for when people are selflessly helping me. So if I can do that for someone else, it’s just as important.” Participant 5 also recalled an instance she received kindness:

Participant 5: I love giving back…people have gone out of their way to help me. I know how grateful I am. Like when I had my wisdom teeth taken out, people brought me popsicles. I was like, ‘Aw, that’s so nice.’ That’s such a minor scale, but there just so much you can do with it. And I think it’s important to make sure everyone is taken care of. [Volunteering] is a really good way to do that.

According to the Self-Determination Theory, introjected regulation is avoiding guilt or anxiety. Many participants reported feeling gratitude to be a motivation for volunteering; therefore, participants may experience a feeling of guilt for their fortune if they did not use volunteering as an outlet.

**Obstacles**

RQ2 asked: What are the perceived obstacles millennial college students encounter when volunteering for a nonprofit organization? Participants reported lack of time and lack of structure as the most significant obstacles to volunteering.
Lack of time.

Lack of time was most frequently cited as an obstacle to volunteering for millennial college students. Participant 5 implies the need for autonomy is a driving force behind college student volunteering:

Participant 5: I think a lot of people don’t have the time to [volunteer.] We’re all so busy that we don’t even feel like we know what we’re doing half the time….When you’re in high school you can be forced into doing it and in college you can be like, ‘I can do whatever I want—I can make my own decisions.’ So I think a lot of it is like, ‘I want to use my time elsewhere.’

Subject 2 believes that many college students are “selfish” with their free time: “You just want to go home and chill or have weekends to yourself sometimes.”

Lack of structure.

This study revealed that the feeling of comfort and confidence was an important intrinsic motivation for college students. It is worth revisiting this point because lack of structure was specifically mentioned as an obstacle for volunteering. Not knowing what to expect prevented Participant 3 from taking part in a volunteer single-day of service sponsored by Greek Life:

Participant 3: [The single-day of service] was too unstructured for me. Not knowing who else is going or what I would be doing. Just the fluidity of it doesn’t appeal to me as much. I want to know what I’m getting into.

The majority of participants preferred having a fixed rather than flexible volunteering schedule. Flexible scheduling would be an obstacle for participants because the flexibility would make it easier to put off the volunteering. Participant 3 said, “I
would feel better about volunteering on a schedule. It’s more motivation to follow through with it if you’re expected to be at a place a certain time every week if you’re held accountable.” Participant 9 agreed that accountability plays a big part in volunteering:

Participant 9: I’m more likely to go if I have a set time because they’re expecting me or this is my commitment. Even though I want to do it and I’m not forced to do it, it’s just with my schedule, if I don’t have to do it then I know I’ll push it off.
Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This research explored the motivations that encouraged volunteering and obstacles that discouraged volunteering for millennial college students. This study used grounded theory to explore and uncover the motivations and obstacles. This qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because the data revealed findings that were not present in the literature. This study was strongly rooted in the Self-Determination Theory, which revealed the motivations that satisfy innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In addition, the concept of social marketing drove this research study. Social marketing is the use of traditional marketing techniques to benefit the greater good (Andreasen, 2002). Discovering the motivations and obstacles to volunteering will determine best marketing practices for nonprofit organizations to attract, recruit and retain millennial college students. Thus, these marketing techniques will be contributing to the greater good.

This study revealed that the feeling of comfort and certainty in a volunteer experience is an important intrinsic motivation for millennial college students. Participants did not like uncertainty; they wanted to know what to expect in their volunteer experience. This need for comfort and certainty derives from the innate psychological needs of competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Participants sought relationships with other volunteers and staff members not only for social interaction, but to feel a sense of comfort and certainty. Volunteers brought friends into new volunteer situations to alleviate uncertainty. Similarly, volunteers formed
relationships with staff members in order to use them as a resource and to feel comfortable in the volunteering environment. Only after a feeling of comfort and certainty was attained did volunteers satisfy their need for competence. Many participants enjoyed the monotony of some tasks because they felt comfortable in knowing what to expect.

Some participants were intrinsically motivated because they enjoyed the actual volunteering task (e.g. working with children, supporting women’s issues). However, many participants did not find pleasure in the actual task (e.g. packing food into boxes, cleaning.) Therefore, a balance is needed between task enjoyment and overall experience: the more enjoyable the task, and thus more intrinsically motivating, the less important other aspects of volunteering become. Conversely, the less enjoyable the task would require a greater overall experience. A positive overall experience may come from other intrinsic or extrinsic motivations that satisfy the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The most commonly reported extrinsic motivation in this study was the desire to see results from volunteer labor. This is consistent with Argyle’s study (1996) that found that over 67 percent of respondents reported that the satisfaction of seeing results was “very important.”

The next most frequently cited extrinsic motivation was the importance of challenges that lead to a transformative experience. An activity that is challenging is important to individuals’ need for competence. As previously discussed, participants preferred not to be challenged in the actual task itself (intrinsic motivation.) They instead preferred tasks that gave them a feeling of comfort and certainty. However, big
challenges that lead to transformative experiences were important to participants.

Finally, “warm glow” is the positive feelings an individual gets from behaving pro-socially (Andreoni, 1990). Many participants reported the positive feeling of giving back to those in need. A criticism of the “slacktivist” trend is the feeling of warm glow people experience when partaking in seemingly insignificant actions they believe is benefiting a cause or organization. In this study, no participant reported positive feelings of sharing information about causes or nonprofit organizations on social media. Instead, participants experienced warm glow only from physical volunteer work. The positive feelings millennial college students experience may result from their need for competence, and this competence is not satisfied through social media sharing. Thus, competence, and therefore the feeling of warm glow is attained through physical volunteering rather than social media activism.

This research revealed that lack of time and structure are the largest obstacles for millennial college students and volunteering. According to literature, the new generation of millennials wants volunteering that is quick with no ongoing commitment (Ellis, 2012) and want flexibility in their volunteering schedule (Lee & Won, 2011). As a result, new volunteering opportunities like single days of service and virtual volunteering has emerged. Four participants had taken part in a single day of service, and the majority of participants felt that this form of volunteering with no ongoing commitment is good way to engage millennial college students who see time as an obstacle to volunteering. However, most participants cited that they would prefer having a fixed volunteer schedule opposed to one that gives them more flexibility. Participants felt that they would be less likely to volunteer if the scheduling was flexible; participants were more likely to
volunteer if a fixed schedule created accountability. No participants were familiar with online volunteering. Participants said that the concept of online volunteering that allows flexibility and no commitment may appeal to college students but does not appeal to them personally.

The preference of fixed scheduling contradicts the Self-Determination Theory because it eliminates the need for autonomy. However, this type of scheduling may increase individuals’ need for competence by creating accountability that holds them responsible for carrying out volunteer commitments.

**Practical Implications**

An understanding of the motivations that encourage volunteering and obstacles that discourage volunteering for millennial college students is of practical importance for nonprofit organizations. Organizations should tailor their recruitment materials to appeal to the millennial college student.

Participants experience a feeling of comfort and certainty when they knew what to expect from a volunteer experience. Therefore, nonprofit organizations should rewrite the volunteering story to clearly communicate what volunteers should expect. All communication should be very specific and leave no questions unanswered and should include examples of activities and amount of time activities should take. For example, an email to a new volunteer who is volunteering at a nonprofit for the first time should explicitly spell out what the volunteer will be asked to do, how long the training will take and who should be contacted if the volunteer has any questions. A personal email will not only put a new volunteer’s mind at ease about what to expect but will also establish a relationship with staff to make the volunteer more comfortable and open to asking
questions. The volunteer process should be explicit and show potential participants how they will contribute to the bigger picture. A nonprofit website that excludes telling the volunteer story is not sufficient for millennial college students.

Next, nonprofits are encouraged to communicate the success that results from volunteers’ work. Social media is an ideal platform to communicate these successes. For example, an animal shelter should post every time an animal is adopted. Volunteers want to see how their efforts are helping. In addition, seeing results will contribute to the volunteers’ feeling of warm glow.

Finally, because millennial college students are pressed for time, nonprofits should focus on changing perceptions about commitment. It is important to give volunteers a sense of autonomy by communicating they are not locked in to this commitment. Most participants reported they would prefer a fixed time schedule because the accountability holds them responsible. It is important for organizations to make it easy for volunteers to initially choose their own schedule. This allows volition but also creates accountability. If possible, a combination of a fixed and flexible schedule is ideal. Volunteers would be able to come to the organization at a regularly scheduled time but would also have the flexibility to volunteer spontaneously if they had discretionary free time.

**Limitations and Direction for Future Research**

This research study was conducted on a homogenous group of college students from a large Midwestern university. It is important to note that all participants came from the journalism program, which is known for its academic rigor. Therefore, a certain personality type may be drawn to the journalism program. Thus, motivations for volunteering may differ for journalism students than students in other academic
programs. Future research should use a more representative sample of college students from varying programs and disciplines.

**Conclusion**

To nonprofit organizations, millennial college students are a valuable demographic: they bring positive energy, digital adeptness, networking, access to university resources and time-flexibility (Aschenbrener, 2010) (Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007). This research revealed that millennial college students are intrinsically motivated if they experience comfort in the situation and certainty about the task at hand. They also desire a balance between task enjoyment and overall volunteer experience. Furthermore, they are extrinsically motivated when they see results from their volunteer labor and when they embrace challenges that lead to transformative experiences. Millennial college students are also extrinsically motivated when they feel a sense of warm glow and when they feel gratitude for their own life situation. Finally, lack of time and lack of structure are the biggest obstacles preventing millennial college students from volunteering. Therefore, it is important for nonprofit managers to understand the motivations and obstacles to volunteering to create the most effective marketing strategies to attract, recruit and retain the volunteers of the future.
References


Appendix
Interview Questions

Background

1. Which organization(s) do you volunteer with?
2. How did you get involved with organization X?
3. Why did you choose organization X?
4. How would you define “volunteerism”? (Give examples e.g. Do you think doing a ALS ice bucket challenge video is volunteering? Is changing your profile photo after the Paris attacks volunteering?)
5. In general, why do you volunteer?
   a. Why do you feel the need to help others?
6. Walk me through the process of how you were recruited.
7. Are you actually enjoying the tasks you’re performing?

Relatedness

1. How important is it to feel a sense of belonging in a volunteering experience?
2. How important is it for you to build relationships with other volunteers?
3. How important is it for you to have a personal relationship with the staff?
4. Do you share your volunteer experiences on social media?

Autonomy

1. Do you prefer to have a set time schedule (fixed) or to volunteer when you want (flexible)?
2. Does the organization embrace new ideas from its volunteers? Have you ever contributed an idea? How was it received?
3. Have you ever taken part in single days of service or online volunteering? How do you feel about them?

**Competence**

1. How important is it to feel challenged while volunteering?

2. What skills have you been able to develop through volunteering?

3. Are you an advocate for social causes via social media? How do you feel your efforts are helping?
   a. Why do you (people) post about causes on social media? What is the expected outcome?
   b. How do you feel about wanting to post photos of your volunteer experience on Facebook? What would others think of you? What do you think of others?

4. Does the organization make you feel valued? If yes, how so?

5. How important is it for the organization to recognize you for your efforts?

6. Have you ever felt uncomfortable or unappreciated when volunteering?

**Obstacles**

1. What do you think is the biggest obstacle of college students volunteering?
   a. Time: what can organizations due to serve this time-sensitive consumers?