



Why Do Physicians Volunteer at Medical Schools and Free Clinics?

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Abstract

Purpose

To understand the reasons why physicians volunteer their time to provide healthcare to the uninsured and to educate future physicians. Another goal is to define the barriers that prevent physicians from volunteering.

Background

Physician volunteers play an integral role in educating medical students and providing health care to the uninsured. Therefore, understanding the reasons why physicians volunteer their time can possibly improve recruitment procedures. It may help clinics and medical schools advertise to prospective volunteer physicians by emphasizing the positives and directly addressing the main concerns in volunteering.

Materials and Methods

A survey was distributed to physicians from multiple specialties who work at the University of Arizona College of Medicine – Phoenix and Banner University Medical Center – Phoenix. The survey consisted of questions regarding physicians' background information, volunteer experience, barriers to volunteerism, and motivation behind their volunteerism. Motivation was evaluated utilizing a validated and widely used survey called the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI).

Results

A total of 100 physicians responded to the survey. 84% of physicians cited "lack of time" as being the primary barrier to volunteerism. 25% and 22% of the physicians cited "Financial Costs" and "Unaware of Opportunity" as barriers, respectively. With respect to VIF components, the "Values" category showed the highest score of 30.38 out of a possible 35, while "career factors" observed the lowest score of 14.09.

Conclusions

Medical schools and clinics could possibly improve their recruitment efforts by making it less time consuming for physicians to volunteer and by minimizing the financial costs to physicians. They could also benefit by advertising the altruistic and humanitarian nature of the volunteer activity.

Introduction

There has been a shift in emphasis of undergraduate medical education from the inpatient to outpatient/primary care-based settings. Accordingly, community-based, outpatient experiences have been identified as a requirement of several accreditation and professional organizations, such as the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME). Therefore, medical schools currently rely on community based physician volunteers to fulfill those requirements.

Free clinics also heavily rely on physician volunteers. There are currently over 1000 free clinics in the United States that provide health care to an average of 1.8 million people each year. These clinics would not be able to survive without physician volunteers.

Understanding the reasons why physicians volunteer their time can possibly improve recruitment procedures. Motivation was evaluated utilizing a validated and widely used survey called the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). The VFI is a 30 question survey that quantifies the importance of six different motivational functions that fuel volunteerism (Values, Understanding, Social, Career, Protective, and Enhancement).

Factors Measured by the VIF Survey

Values : This centers on the opportunities that volunteerism provides for an individual to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others.

Understanding : This involves the opportunity for volunteerism to permit new learning experiences and the chance to exercise knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise go unpracticed.

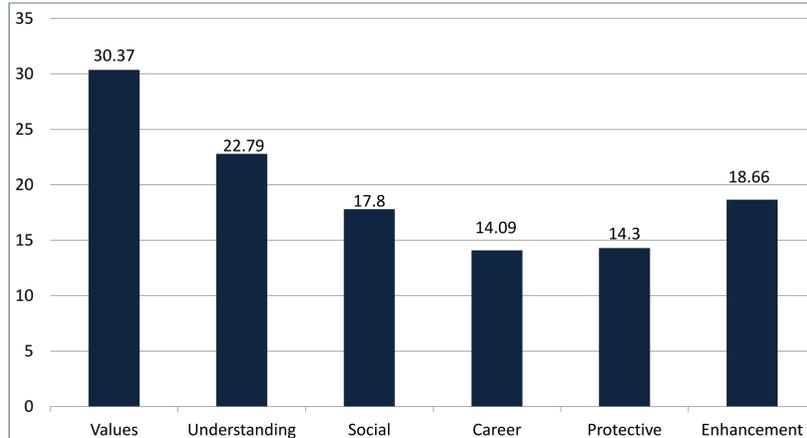
Social : This offers opportunities to be with one's friends or to engage in an activity viewed favorably by important others. This reflects motivations primarily concerning relationships with others.

Career : This is concerned primarily with career-related benefits that may be obtained from participation in volunteer work.

Protective : In the case of volunteerism this may serve to reduce guilt over being more fortunate than others and to address one's own personal problems.

Enhancement : This centers on personal development, personal growth, and higher self-esteem.

Motivation Behind Volunteerism



Results

A total of 100 physicians responded to the survey. 52% of the respondents were primary care physicians. 73% and 49% of the physicians volunteer in medical education and within a clinical setting, respectively. When surveyed the barriers of volunteerism, 84% of the physicians cited "lack of time" as being the primary barrier to volunteerism. Furthermore, 25% and 22% of physicians cited "Financial Costs" and "Unaware of Opportunity" as barriers.

With respect to the VIF survey components, the "Values" category showed the highest score of 30.38 out of a 35 point Likert scale, while the "Career" factor observed the lowest score of 14.09. Physicians who have been in practice for less than 16 years show a statistically significant increase in "Career" factors compared to the ones who have been in practice for more than 16 years.

The multivariate regression model shows that a 1% increase in the aggregate score of the "Career" and "Protective" factors, rendered a 27% and 28% increase in the number of volunteer hours, respectfully.

Physicians' Background

Variables	# of Physicians
Specialty	
No Primary Care	48
Primary Care	52
Length of Practice (Years)	
≤ 16	51
>16	49
Work Hours Per Week (Hours)	
≤ 50	61
>50	39
Volunteering Location	
Clinical	50
Educational	73
Other	24

Barriers to Volunteerism

Variables	# of Physicians
Lack of Time	84
Lack of Interest	7
Malpractice Concern	19
Financial Cost	25
Unaware of Opportunities	22
Language Barrier	9
Expectation of Inefficiency/Disorganization at Site	14
Other	12

Conclusions

- Physicians are mainly driven to volunteer by their altruistic and humanitarian concern for others.
- Lack of time, financial cost, and unawareness of opportunities are the top 3 barriers to physician volunteerism.
- Medical schools and free clinics could benefit by making it less time consuming for physicians to volunteer and by minimizing the financial costs to physicians. They could also benefit by advertising the altruistic and humanitarian nature of the volunteer activity.
- Organizations trying to recruit younger physician volunteers could benefit by advertising ways in which the volunteer activity can help advance the physician's career.