Engaging Generation Z: Exploring Volunteering Preferences and Influential Factors for 4-H Programming

Introduction

Emerging Adult Outcomes

A recent study of 4-H alumni who are members of Generation Z, by Marshall-Wheeler et al. (2023), sought to compare long-term outcomes between 4-H alumni who were very involved with 4-H to those who were not very active with 4-H and to compare those differences to the general U.S. population. Their work demonstrated that Gen Z 4-H alumni show better long-term outcomes, including community involvement, when compared to the general U.S. population. The seminal work of Gambone et al. (2002) associated several early adult outcomes with positive youth development experiences. One of these outcomes is community involvement, which is defined as active contribution to and volunteering in community service. Other and more recent youth development models include this same indicator. In their work on the 4-H Thriving Model of Positive Youth Development, Arnold (2018) and Arnold and Gagnon (2019), for instance, include civic engagement as a long-term outcome.

Generation Z as Volunteers

Beginning in 2003, Gen Zers, or individuals born after 1995, entered adulthood and the vast pool of potential volunteers for youth-serving organizations. A multistate research study of 4-H youth development volunteers published in 2020 showed that "understanding what motivates individuals to volunteer can help to support recruitment and retention of volunteers" (Grant et al., 2020, p. 34). As a result of conducting extensive research into the characteristics of members belonging to various generations, Seemiller and Grace (2019) further explained that by understanding historical context, we can enhance our understanding and appreciation for the

distinctive behaviors and perspectives of individuals within a particular generational group. Krauss (2021) explained the historical context that shapes Gen Zers, saying,

> While many of today's kids have been directly affected by the most shameful parts of American life-violence, waste, hate–their hyper-connectivity, diversity, and penchant for social change has motivated them not only to learn about issues but to track them, report them in real time, and then work together and with adults to make change happen. (2021, p.13)

The former dean of students at the University of Virginia further noted that although Gen Zers exhibit several similarities to the previous wave of Millennials, cultural analysts anticipate a distinct and qualitative shift in the forthcoming cohort (Rue, 2018).

The differences expressed by this new cohort indicate the strategies used to recruit, support, engage, and retain Gen Zers may need to differ from those directed at the typical 4-H volunteer. However, limited research is available that explores the influences that contribute to the motivation of Gen Zers to engage in volunteerism (Howard, 2016). To further explore these findings, 4-H volunteer specialists from the Western region developed a survey to study the basic characteristics of Gen Zers that inform decisions to volunteer, social/core values expressed, types of volunteering preferred, and knowledge or interest described related to positive youth development and the 4-H Thriving Model of Positive Youth Development (Arnold, 2020).

Gen Zers responding to this survey and other research studies indicate an increased desire to volunteer for organizations that identify a mission centered on education. Studies indicate that Gen Zers may delay or avoid post-secondary degree-seeking at higher education institutions but not on-the-job training and internships. Citing research into post-secondary behaviors and employment, Krauss pointed out that for Gen Zers, obtaining a post-secondary credential ought

to hold personal significance and be financially feasible. Krauss additionally says that high school educators who work with this generation of young people support this approach to higher education by explaining that "educators are now pulling back from the popular stance that every student should strive for a four-year college degree. Many now see the personal toll of sending an unprepared student away . . . without the resources needed for the journey" (Krauss, 2021,p. 92).

Purpose and Objectives

We explored the volunteer recruitment, retention, utilization, and recognition of adult members of Generation Z. The research objectives were to:

1. Discover how Gen Zers prefer to volunteer.

2. Describe factors that influence their decision to volunteer and not to volunteer.

3. Understand the social and core values that guide their choices to volunteer.

4. Explore previous experiences motivating volunteerism.

Methods

Measures

Our goal was to design a survey to collect responses deemed valuable for informing the practices of organizations regarding the recognition, utilization, and retention of Gen Z volunteers. We designed questions allowing respondents to self-report their information based on current, historical, familial, or volunteer opportunities. Questions related to motivations to volunteer explored the respondents' history with the 4-H program, preferred types of volunteering opportunities, and factors that influenced their decision to volunteer, continue to volunteer, and not to volunteer with an organization. The survey also included a question to determine the social or core values influencing their volunteer choices.

We asked participants who volunteered now or in the past to rate 18items intended to measure factors that influenced their decision to volunteer or continue volunteering with an organization. In addition, we asked participants who had never volunteered before to rate the factors that influenced their decision not to volunteer. Answers to questions about the participants' volunteering decisions were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*), with the option of "I don't know" also available. The analysis excluded cases with an "I don't know" response. The scales used to measure the decision to volunteer, continue volunteering, and not volunteer had Cronbach's alpha values of .85, .89, and .94, respectively.

The survey also included a set of demographic questions related to gender, residence type and state, and race and ethnicity. Before we administered the survey to the target sample, we piloted it with a small group of Gen Zers. The pilot testing helped with improving survey question readability, construct validity, and scale reliability. The Institutional Review Boards of the University of California, University of Idaho, and New Mexico State University approved the study protocol and the survey prior to its administration.

Sampling

The target sample of the study includes individuals 18 years and older who were born between 1995 and 2003. We restricted the cut-off year to 2003 to involve only Gen Zers who were at least 18 years old at the time the survey was conducted. The study targeted 4-H-enrolled current and past members and interested Gen Zers in six Western region states. Survey sample frames were created for each participating state primarily based on the age criteria using the 4-H enrollment database. We used both purposive sampling by surveying qualified 4-H alumni and convenience sampling using emails and various social media platforms in the Western region.

We collected survey data using online data collection software via emails and web links between December 2021 and February 2022. Non-respondents were contacted with reminder emails to improve the survey response rate. In total, 910 individuals completed the survey electronically, via email or through social media posts using web links. Errors in the email addresses of several potential participants might have been a source of non-response bias associated with the study design.

The demographic information of the study sample, including the sample distribution of the six participating states, is presented in Table 1. Most respondents identified themselves as White (65.4%) in the sample. This demographic distribution reflects the traditional enrollment demographics observed in 4-H programs and in studies that predominantly focused on data from 4-H youth members (Gagnon et al., 2023a; Gagnon et al., 2023b; Learner et al., 2023; Marshall-Wheeler et al., 2023).

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Respondents

Gender ($N = 695$)	n	$\%$
Male	144	20.7
Female	522	75.1
Nonbinary	18	2.6
Gender identity not listed	2	0.3
Prefer not to respond	9	1.3
Residence Type ($N = 696$)	n	$\%$
Rural (non-farm residence / town under 10,000)	202	29

	n	%
Town or city (10,000– 50,000)	170	24.4
Suburb of a city over 50,000	67	9.6
Other	8	1.1
Farm	137	19.7
City over 50,000	112	16.1
Race/Ethnicity ($N = 900$)	*n*	*%*
Hispanic or Latino	77	8.5
American Indian or Alaskan Native	25	2.7
Asian	28	3.1
Black or African American	7	0.8
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	7	0.8
White	595	65.4
Other	23	2.5
Majority of Time Spent ($N = 910$)	*n*	*%[a]*
Employed	371	40.8
4-year college	221	24.3
Self-employed	72	7.9
2-year college	61	6.7
Other	60	6.6
Grad school	38	4.2
High school	32	3.5
Vocational/Trade school	12	1.3
Military	9	1

Participating State (*N* = 909)	*n*	*%*
California	408	44.9
Idaho	289	31.8
New Mexico	131	14.4
Colorado	46	5.1
Utah	23	2.5
Wyoming	12	1.3

Note. [a]3.7% of respondents did not indicate how they spent the majority of their time.

Analysis

The survey data were cleaned for incomplete responses and missing values before analysis. We used descriptive statistical analysis, including cross-tabulation, to review and report the distribution of responses to individual questions. Discrete data analysis involving a chi-square test of independence and Cramer's V was used to test the association between categorical variables and to determine the strengths of associations, respectively. The paper presents aggregate results rather than information for specific demographics.

Survey respondents were asked to elaborate on their views on short-, medium-, and long-term volunteer opportunities. We performed a deductive thematic analysis of these qualitative data to extract themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We coded the data from each respondent based on the identified themes to study the distribution of frequencies of the themes under each category of short-, medium-, and long-term volunteer opportunities.

We analyzed the demographic information reported by survey respondents and the comparative enrollment data from 4-H Volunteers in multiple states. Of particular interest were issues of parity in reaching underresourced populations. A key component to meeting the

developmental needs of youth includes a willingness to attend to improving practices and policies that ensure equity.

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Results

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Objective 1: Volunteering Preference

Gen Zers indicated the type of volunteer opportunity they prefer. Out of 824 respondents, 35.6% ($n = 293$) preferred short-term, 41.5% ($n = 342$) preferred medium-term, and 22.9% ($n = 189$) preferred long-term volunteer opportunities. We did not have any operational definitions for the time frames of short, medium, and long but instead allowed respondents the option to define these terms.in answer to an open-ended question. There were 727 respondents who entered a narrative answer. The respondents were asked to elaborate further on their own definition of volunteer opportunities. The data under each category of short-, medium-, and long-term were thematically analyzed to extract major themes. Under each category, we extracted five major themes: (a) Time-bound, (b) Event-specific, (c) Schedule flexibility, (d) Audience-specific, and (e) Personal choice. The following paragraphs describe the responses under each thematic area.

Time-Bound

The responses grouped in this category define the selected volunteer opportunity as one bound by either specific or broad time constraints representing an extremely wide range of responses.

Examples of these responses:

**Short-Term*:* 2-4 hours, 4-H project year, different dates you can sign up for, but not a daily commitment.

Medium- Term*:* mission trips, 3 months or more, weekly with a couple big events during the year.

Long-Term*:* 20 to 25 years, working specifically with 4-H youth for close to 10 years, anything that lasts more than a few months.

Event-Specific

The length of the volunteer opportunity is described according to involvement in specific occasions such as a banquet, tournament, fair events, or bringing meals to a homeless shelter. Notably, this coding occurs most frequently among "short-term" responses.

Schedule Flexibility

These responses described the need for volunteering to be shaped by other primary restraints or time commitments. One sample response: "Seasonal, like through the summer, or the holidays."

Audience-Specific

These responses specifically mentioned the recipients of the service as being the motivating factor for the volunteering. Frequently mentioned are community, veterans, and food banks. Common answers also mentioned clean-up projects for parks, highways, beaches, or fairgrounds.

Personal Choice

Qualitative responses in this cluster mentioned things like being invited, choosing when to sign up or make a commitment, and enjoyment or anticipated enjoyment of the work. Noteworthy is that concepts such as leader, mentor, advisor, and relationship were prevalent in those responses listing long-term as the preferred type of volunteering.

We coded the data under each of the five themes and calculated the frequency of categories within each theme (see Figure 1). Relatively, a higher percentage of responses (47.2%) from respondents who preferred short-term volunteer opportunities referred to the time-bound nature of the volunteer opportunities, and only one out of four responses referred to a specific audience type or a purpose. Similarly, 52.3% of responses under the medium-term theme referred to the time-bound theme. However, of the respondents who preferred long-term volunteer opportunities, most (50.3%) referred to a specific audience or a purpose, and nearly 35% referred to the time-bound nature of the volunteering opportunities.

Figure 1

Distribution of thematic areas under each group of volunteer opportunity preference
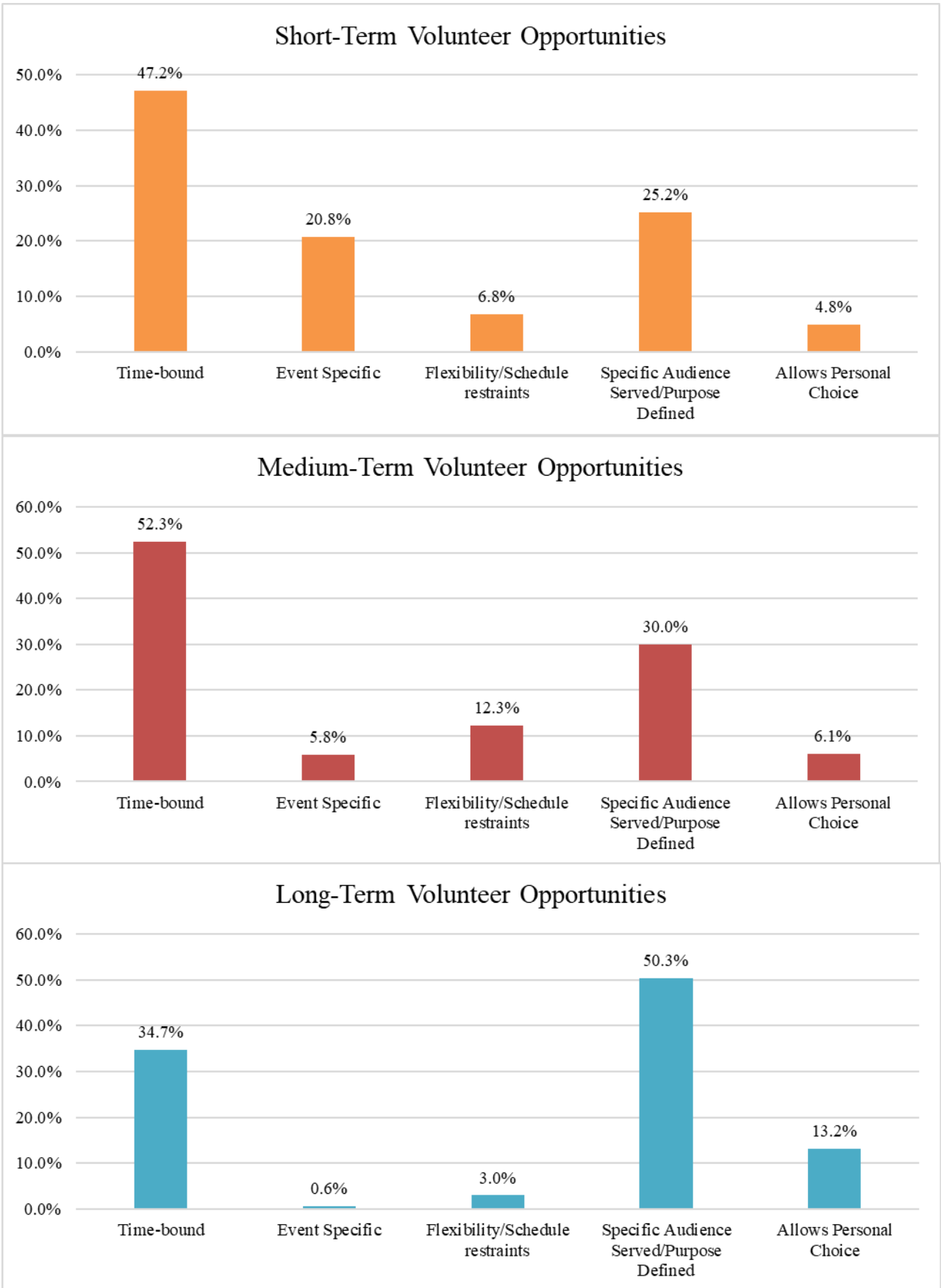
Objective 2: Factors Influencing Volunteering Decisions

The survey participants were asked to rate 18 different aspects related to their decision to volunteer and their motivation to continue volunteering with an organization. The results showed that the mission and values of the organization (*M*= 4.5, *SD* = 0.8), the meaningfulness of the volunteer experience (*M*= 4.4, *SD* = 0.9), and the organization's support for volunteers (*M*= 4.3, *SD* = 1.0) were the three most influential factors affecting their decision to volunteer (see Table 2). Regarding their decision to continue volunteering, the top three factors were the meaningfulness of the volunteer experience (*M*= 4.5, *SD* = 0.8), the mission and values of the organization (*M*= 4.4, *SD* = 0.8), and their personal commitment to the success of the organization (*M*= 4.3, *SD* = 0.9) (see Table 3).

Table 2

Factors Influencing Decision to Volunteer

Factors	*N*	*M*	*SD*
1. The mission and values of the organization align with my core values	704	4.5	0.8
2. How meaningful the volunteer experience is for me	712	4.4	0.9
3. How the organization supports volunteers	712	4.3	1.0
4. My personal commitment to the success of the organization	707	4.2	0.9
5. Mission of organization has a personal connection to me or someone close to me (heart disease, cancer, 4-H participation, etc.)	712	4.2	1.0

6. Experience with the organization	716	4.1	1.0
7. The time required to volunteer	710	4.0	1.0
8. Other life, family, and personal commitments	698	4.0	1.0
9. The influence of a friend who volunteers for the organization	706	3.8	1.2
10. Organization personally invites volunteers to participate	703	3.7	1.1
11. Sharing my expertise with the organization	709	3.6	1.1
12. How the organization supervises and gives feedback to volunteers	711	3.6	1.1
13. Additional optional training offered (e.g., skills, resume, interests, etc.)	701	3.4	1.2
14. The collective power of the organization gives a platform for my voice to be heard about things that matter to me	709	3.4	1.2
15. The volunteer habits of an adult who cares about me	694	3.4	1.3
16. The amount of training required	712	3.4	1.1
17. How the organization recognizes volunteers	709	3.3	1.3
18. How the organization recruits volunteers	695	3.2	1.3

Table 3

Factors Influencing Decisions to Continue Volunteering

Factors	N	M	SD
1. How meaningful the volunteer experience is for me	585	4.5	0.8
2. The mission and values of the organization align with my core values	581	4.4	0.8
3. My personal commitment to the success of the organization	584	4.3	0.9
4. Experience with the organization	601	4.2	1.0
5. The time required to volunteer	587	4.1	1.0
6. How the organization supports volunteers	595	4.1	1.0
7. Mission of organization has a personal connection to me or someone close to me (heart disease, cancer, 4-H participation, etc.)	586	4.1	1.1
8. Other life, family, and personal commitments	576	4.0	1.1
9. How the organization supervises and gives feedback to volunteers	589	3.8	1.1
10. Sharing my expertise with the organization	584	3.6	1.2
11. The influence of a friend who volunteers for the organization	595	3.6	1.2
12. Additional optional training offered (e.g., skills, resume, interests, etc.)	587	3.5	1.2

13. The collective power of the organization gives a platform for my voice to be heard about things that matter to me	586	3.4	1.3
14. How the organization recognizes volunteers	589	3.4	1.3
15. Organization personally invites volunteers to participate	591	3.4	1.3
16. The amount of training required	591	3.3	1.1
17. The volunteer habits of an adult who cares about me	578	3.2	1.3
18. How the organization recruits volunteers	604	3.0	1.3

Factors that had the least influence on respondents' decision to volunteer or continue volunteering were how the organization recruits volunteers and the amount of training required. For respondents who had never volunteered before, we examined factors that affected their decision not to volunteer. The top three factors were other life, family, and personal commitments (M= 4.2, SD = 1.3), the time required to volunteer (M= 3.7, SD = 1.3), and how the organization supports volunteers (M= 3.7, SD = 1.4) (see Table 4).

Table 4

Factors Influencing Decision to Not Volunteer

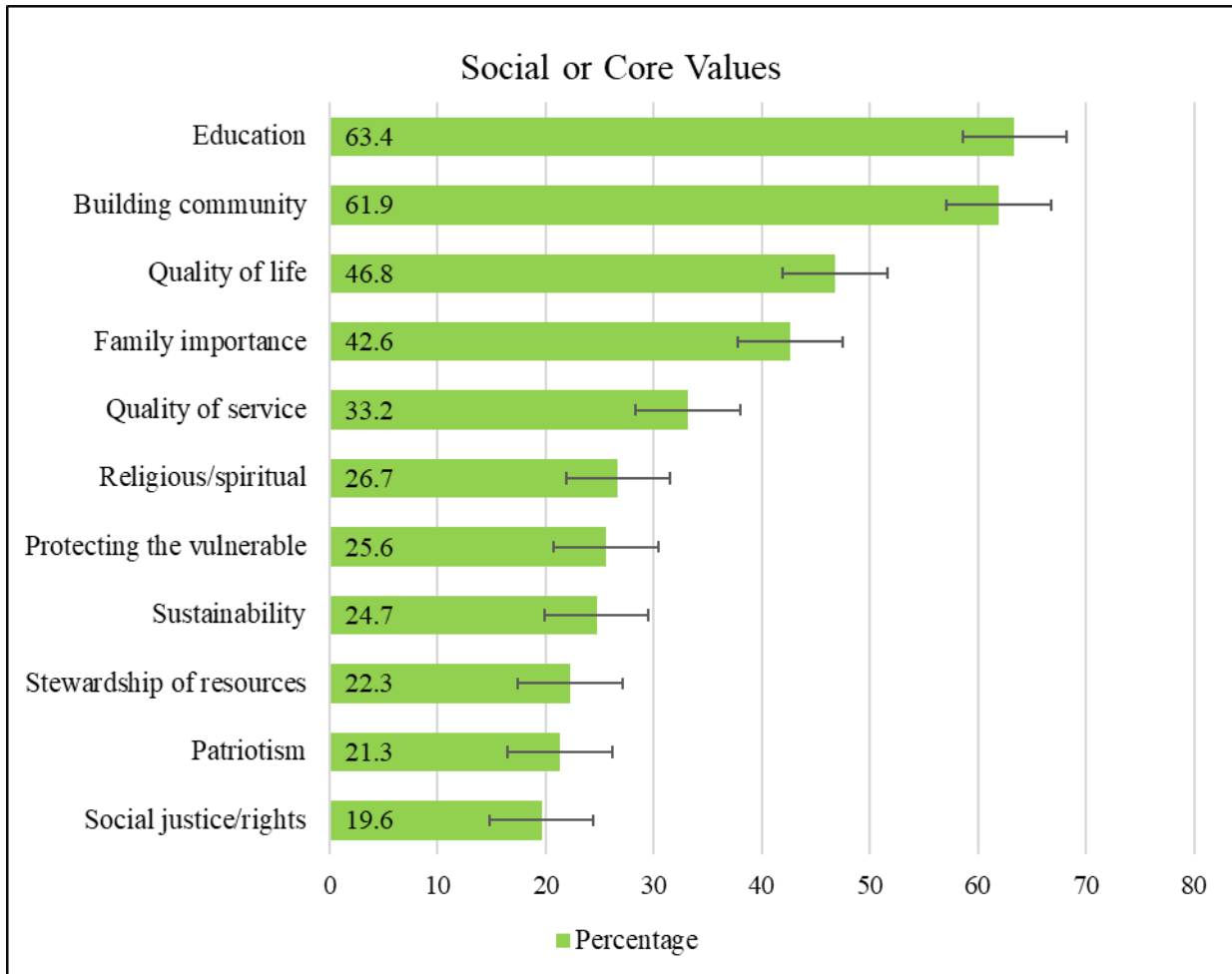| Factors	N	M	SD
1. Other life, family, and personal commitments	49	4.2	1.3
2. The time required to volunteer	47	3.7	1.3
3. How the organization supports volunteers	48	3.7	1.4
4. Experience with the organization	49	3.6	1.4

5. The influence of a friend who volunteers for the organization	48	3.5	1.5
6. The volunteer experience was not meaningful for me	41	3.4	1.5
7. The mission and values of the organization did not align with my core values	46	3.2	1.6
8. The amount of training required	47	3.1	1.5
9. How the organization supervises and gives feedback to volunteers	46	3.0	1.4
10. How the organization recognizes volunteers	48	2.9	1.4
11. How the organization recruits volunteers	44	2.9	1.5
12. The volunteer habits of others	48	2.9	1.5
13. The collective power of the organization did not give a platform for my voice to be heard about things that matter to me	45	2.8	1.5
14. Additional optional training was not offered (e.g., skills, resume, interests, etc.)	42	2.5	1.5

Objective 3: Social and core values that guide choices to volunteer

Gen Zers reported the social and core values that guide their choice to volunteer. The result showed that the majority of respondents reported education (63.4%), followed by building community (61.9%), as the top two factors guiding their choice. Only one out of five (19.6%) reported social justice or rights as the guiding value. Figure 2 presents the social and core values in descending order based on their frequencies.

Figure 2

Shows the value of the social or core values influencing the choice to volunteer

Social or Core Values

Category	Percentage
Education	63.4
Building community	61.9
Quality of life	46.8
Family importance	42.6
Quality of service	33.2
Religious/spiritual	26.7
Protecting the vulnerable	25.6
Sustainability	24.7
Stewardship of resources	22.3
Patriotism	21.3
Social justice/rights	19.6

Note. $N = 910$.

Objective 4: Previous experiences motivating volunteerism

In the study sample, 92.8% of the Gen Zers ($n = 761$) are currently volunteering or have volunteered in the past. For 73.5% ($n = 559$) of those 761 respondents, either their parents or guardians have volunteered. The chi-square test of independence showed a significant association between the two variables at a level of significance of .01 (see Table 5). The results

showed that it is more likely that Gen Zers would volunteer if their guardians or parents have volunteering experience ($\chi^2 = 30.3$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). We calculated Cramer's V to measure the strength of the association, which was found to be .19.

Table 5

Association Between Gen Zers and their Parents' Volunteering Experience

Do or did your guardians or parents volunteer?	Are you volunteering now or volunteered in the past?				df	χ^2	*p-value*
	Yes		No				
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*			
Yes	559	73.5	24	40.7			
No	140	18.4	27	45.8	2	30.29	<.001
Not sure	62	8.1	8	13.6			
Total, *N* = 820	**761**	**92.8%**	**59**	**7.2%**			

Note. $N = 820$.

The survey respondents reported they volunteered in different organizations. The organizations they volunteered for are listed in Table 6 in descending order. Next to youth organizations such as 4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, etc., a relatively higher percentage of the Gen Z respondents volunteered for a faith-based organization (32.6%) (see Table 6). When asked if their previous relationship or contact with the organization have a role in their volunteering, most of them ($n = 470$, 67.2%) responded yes. Only 65 respondents (9.3%) said their previous relationship or contact did not play a role in their volunteering for the organization.

Table 6

A List of Volunteering Organizations Survey Respondents Volunteered For

	n	*%*
Youth organization (4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire, The Y)	604	66.4%
Faith-based	297	32.6%
Other type of organization	221	24.3%
Environmental/Societal (Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Peace Corps, VISTA, etc.)	107	11.8%
Disaster or Emergency Preparedness (Red Cross, FEMA, etc.)	82	9.0%
Political/Advocacy	64	7.0%

Implications and Conclusion

Two significant findings from this data set highlight some good news about how Gen Zers have volunteered and are predisposed to volunteer as adults. Gen Zers volunteer at a high rate and do not need a previous relationship or experience to consider partnering with an organization. It will be important for 4-H volunteer recruitment efforts not only to show how a volunteer can make a difference in the lives of youth but also to highlight how the volunteer opportunity is connected to their key core values. The most meaningful values for Gen Zers are building communities, advancing education, and improving the quality of life for volunteers and those they serve. According to survey responses, critical factors that influence the decision to

volunteer are alignment of core values and organizational mission (90.5%), meaningful

experience (86%), and how volunteers are supported (85%).

An initial summary of the qualitative responses indicated that there were five major

themes, which arose for each of the terms (short, medium, and long). These data show that time-

bound is an important component of the respondents' definitions of short- and medium-term

volunteering opportunities, as it appeared in 47.2% and 52.3% of the definitions, respectively.

Following time-bound, the next most frequently mentioned category in the short- and medium-

term definitions was a specific audience and/or purpose.. For respondents defining long-term,

time-bound (34%) and specific audience and/or purpose (50%) were again important categories.

However, for long-term responses, specific audience and/or purpose was ranked first and time-

bound responses were ranked second. This is an important factor when categorizing a volunteer

experience as long-term. Further research and exploration of these concepts is indicated by the

significant range of definitions supplied by respondents and the low response rate.

One of the limitations of the study is selection bias, as the study sample predominantly

comprised individuals who participated in 4-H youth development programs. Using this

convenience sample may have introduced sampling frame bias to the data. Furthermore, the

demographic composition of our study sample predominantly comprises individuals of White

ethnicity. This homogeneity limits the generalizability of the study findings beyond this racial

group, thereby posing challenges in extending conclusions to a broader population of Generation

Z individuals beyond those engaged in 4-H programs. The study specifically targeted individuals

aged 18 years and older, born before 2003, thereby excluding younger members of Generation Z.

Hence, we advise exercising caution when generalizing the findings to all age groups within Gen

Z. To enhance the validity of the study, we recommend replicating it using a diverse range of

Generation Z individuals.

Considerations To Recruit and Retain Gen Zers (see Figures 3–7)

Figure 3

Types of volunteer opportunities; https://bit.ly/GZ-Vol-Time
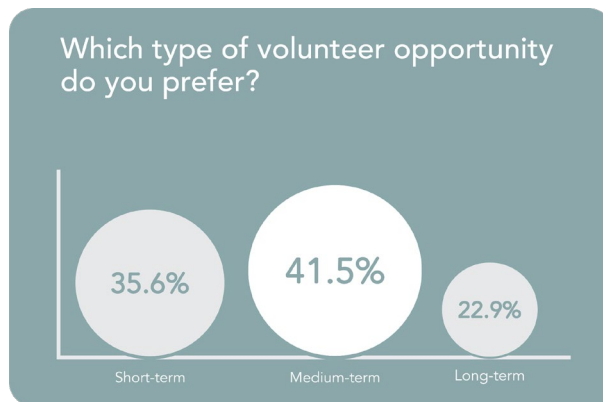
Implications Defining Time Commitment:
- Recognize that respondents define short, medium, and long-term opportunities

  differently.

- Instead of defining what *medium* means to the organization, describe the opportunity,

  allowing the volunteer to determine if the experience fits for them.

- Identify opportunities that are time-bound and make an impact.

Figure 4

Factors that influence volunteering; https://bit.ly/GZ-Influence

Implications for Recruitment:

- Clearly articulate the mission & core values of the organization.

- Highlight specific meaning & purpose of the experience, describe impacts.

- Describe the intentional relationship between the organization & the volunteer: dialogue

  experience expectations of both parties.

Figure 5

Factors that dissuade volunteering. https://bit.ly/GZ-Leave

How much do these factors influence your decision to NOT volunteer or no longer volunteer with an organization?

69.4% — Experience within organization

70.8% — Support

64.6% — Influence of volunteering friend

Implications for Recruitment & Retention:

- Recognize the reputation of the organization influences volunteer participation.

- Preemptively equip yourself to address reputation or perception issues of the

  organization.

- Develop & follow volunteer support system protocols.

**Figure 6**

Values that influence volunteer participation; https://bit.ly/GZ-Values

What social or core values influence your choice to volunteer?

63.4% — Education

61.9% — Community Building

Implications for Marketing:

- Highlight the educational value of the opportunity.

- Focus on community-building potential.

Figure 7

Factors that influence continued volunteering. [*https://bit.ly/GZ-Retain*](https://bit.ly/GZ-Retain)
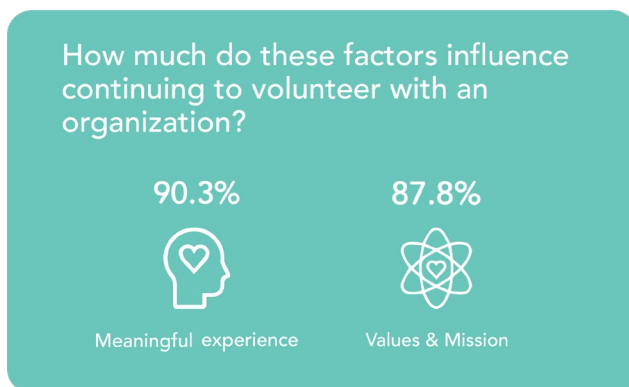
Implications for Retention:

- Ensure there is a system for periodic check-ins that highlight experience congruence.

- Communicate how contributions move the organization toward meaningful outcomes.

- Use the values & language of 'education' & 'community building' when describing impact & outcomes.

Data from the research show that Gen Z volunteers are ready and willing to volunteer with an organization even if they have not previously volunteered with that organization. Recent 4-H alumni are a perfect example of an accessible resource (Marshall-Wheeler et al., 2023). The data also show that other factors, such as how the mission and values of the organization align with Gen Zers' core values and how the organization supports volunteers, moderately to extremely influence Gen Zers' decision to volunteer for an organization. Factors such as the

meaningfulness of the volunteer experience and the organization's mission and values influence their decision to continue volunteering with an organization.

There were many topics suggested by the data, such as volunteer utilization and retention, which we did not explore in this paper but which have valuable implications for future analysis, discussion, and research. Further, we questioned and discussed the structures of the Extension organization, which do not align with factors that attract under-resourced populations (see Table 1). This topic is an ongoing systemic conversation about organizational structure that will inform volunteer recruitment and retention efforts that this data did not fully explore.

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