

Working as a Clinic Volunteer Boosts Students' Well-Being Indicators

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study investigates the benefits to college students of participating in a volunteer program at a health clinic.

Hypothesis: College students who serve in a healthcare volunteer program regularly benefit from this experience in multiple ways that improve their sense of purpose and well-being.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research shows volunteer work that involves helping others in need, leads to improved mental health (Anderson 2014, Crook 2006). Studies examining the impact of volunteer work on students found multiple benefits, including career development, improved empathy and cultural literacy, social skills and confidence (Clary 1998, Haski-Leventhal 2020, Tonnesen 2023). This study investigates the benefits to students of regular volunteer work in a healthcare setting at Texas State University.

Today's college students struggle with well-documented increased stressors and mental health symptoms (Lipson 2022). We investigate whether work as a healthcare volunteer may help students improve their own sense of purpose, mental health, and resilience. If so, volunteer work has the potential to benefit the healthcare organization, patients, and simultaneously improve the well-being of the student volunteers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- For college students, does experience serving as a volunteer in a healthcare setting lead to improved self-assessment of mental health symptoms, social connections, resilience, self-worth or sense of purpose?
- Compared to the general student body, do healthcare volunteers report improvement in self-assessed mental health symptoms, social connections, resilience, self-worth, or sense of purpose?
- Do students believe that serving as a volunteer supports their academic performance or career readiness?

METHODOLOGY 1

We used an anonymous paper survey instrument to collect information by self-report from college students who served in the MedCats clinic volunteer program at Texas State University. The survey was introduced to volunteers twice: once at the beginning of their volunteer service, and once after 4 or more months of weekly volunteer service. Two cohorts of volunteers (2023-2024 and 2024-2025) were surveyed.

The survey included information regarding perceived health and well-being (indicators of mental health and resilience) and other perceived benefits of participating in the volunteer program.

Survey results were transferred into Excel for analysis. Results were compared for the "before" volunteer service responses and the "after" volunteer service responses.

Results for our volunteers after their service were also compared to the results for the entire Texas State student body surveyed in the 2023 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey.

METHODOLOGY 2

Questions on the survey instrument asked students to indicate their level of agreement on a 6-point scale. They included the following:

Being a volunteer has contributed to my academic success.
I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.
I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.
I am competent and capable.
I am able to adapt when changes occur.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

Additional questions asked about mood symptoms, including the following:

I feel worthless.

All of The time Most of the time Some of the time A little of the time None of the time

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

- The total number of participants in the "before" group was 31.
- The total number of participants in the "after" group was 22.
- The volunteers consist of 46 females and 1 male.
- Some (but not all) volunteers completed both a "before" and "after" survey.
- Null hypothesis 1: Work as a volunteer does not cause changes in well-being (or survey answers).
- Null hypothesis 2: Responses of student volunteers are not different from responses of the general student body.
- Chi square analysis with categorical variables (paired t-test with 1 degree of freedom) was performed.

RESULTS

- Volunteer respondents' answers were significantly different from the general student body's answers.
- Two indicators of well-being (believing that one leads a purposeful and meaningful life and believing that one contributes to the happiness and well-being of others) increased significantly after students served as a volunteer in our health clinic for at least 4 months.

DISCUSSION

Prior research has consistently documented that volunteering regularly to help others has a positive impact on volunteers' mental health (Anderson 2014, Crook 2006). Working as part of a volunteer organization is also an effective way to strengthen social connections (Haski-Leventhal 2020).

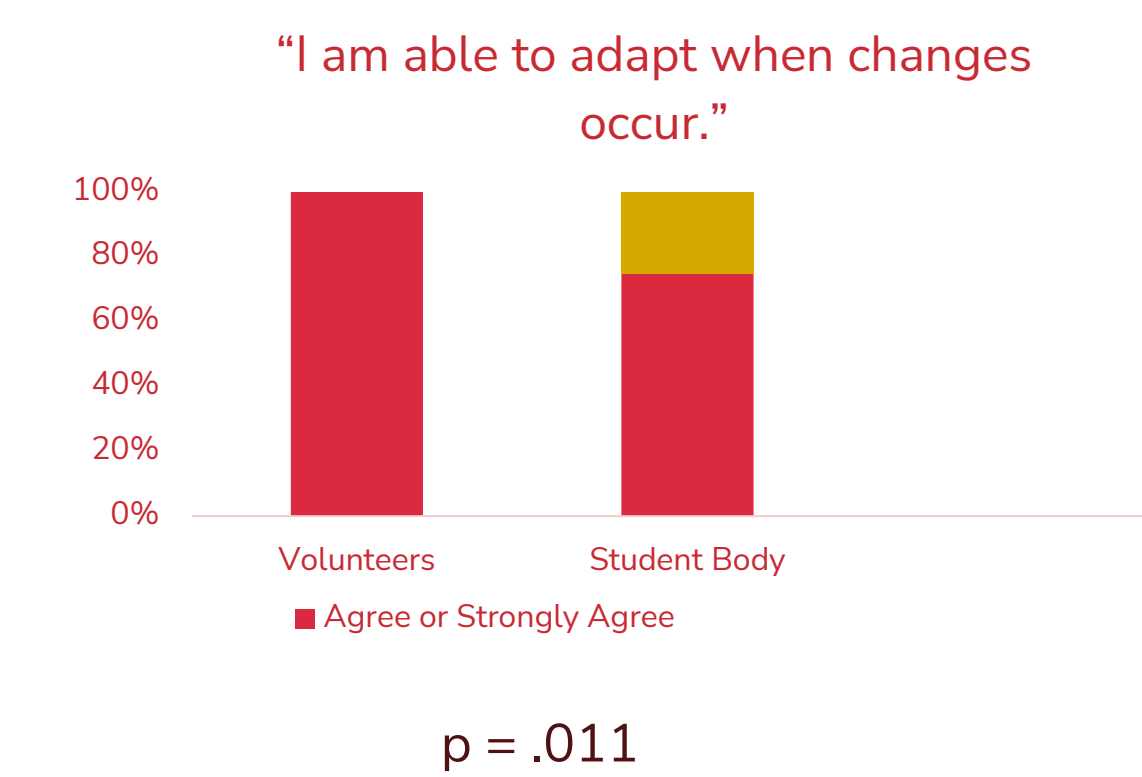
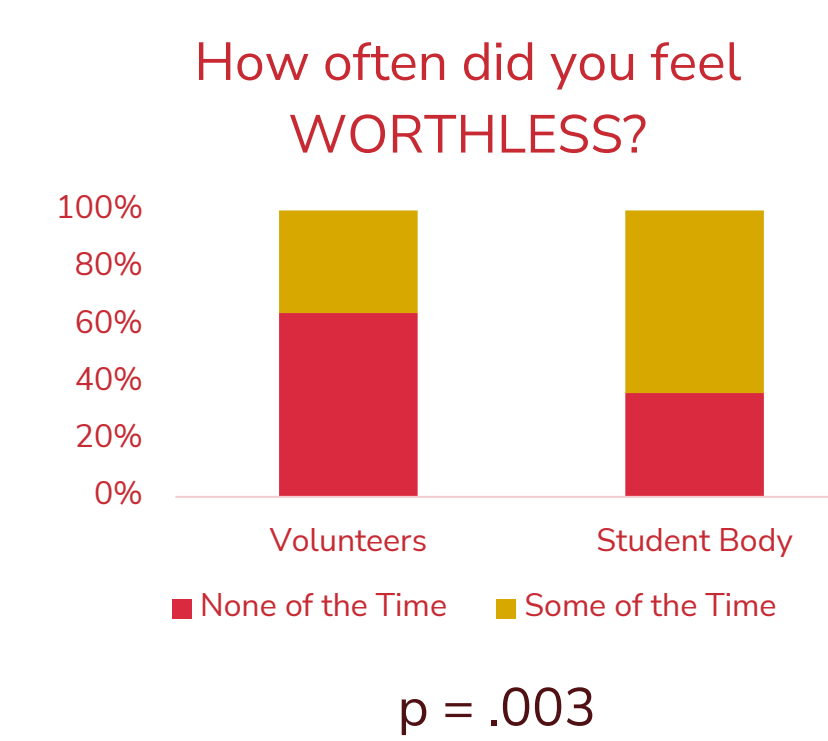
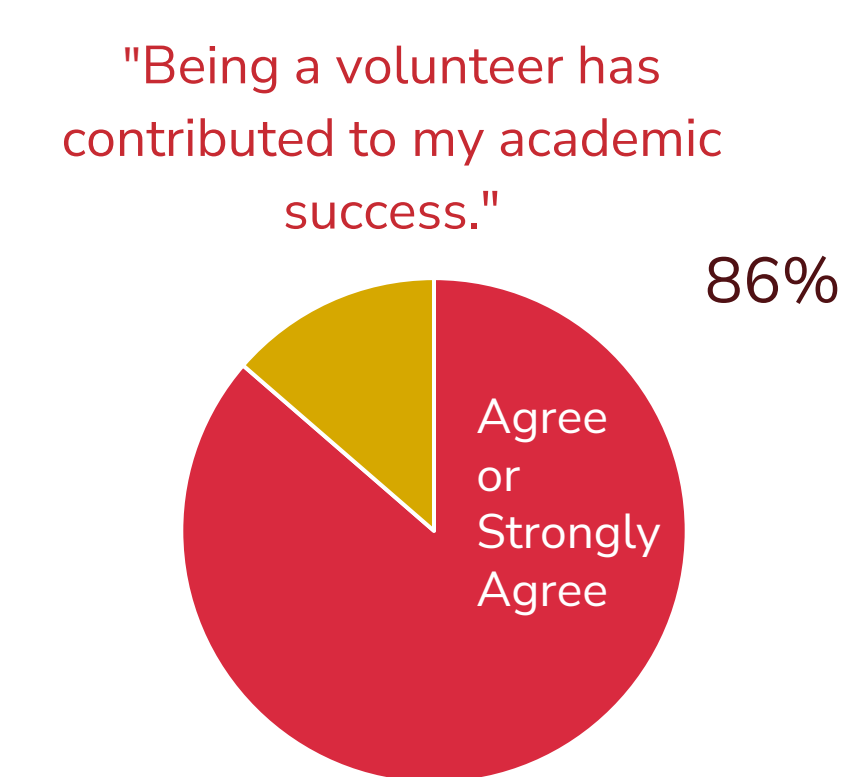
Because we know that university students are currently struggling with both mental health symptoms and social isolation, college health professionals need effective strategies to address these issues. **This study provides evidence that encouraging college students to do volunteer work may be an effective strategy to improve their well-being.**

While the student volunteers who completed this survey did show statistically significant improvement in markers of well-being, the study does have several weaknesses. Most importantly, the sample size (31 participants before serving as a volunteer and 22 participants after serving as a volunteer) was small. Additionally, the timing of the survey completion during the academic year may have influenced the results. For example, if students had just finished their final exams prior to completing the survey, they may have been less stressed and more likely to report positive findings. More research is needed to fully evaluate the impact of volunteer work on college students.

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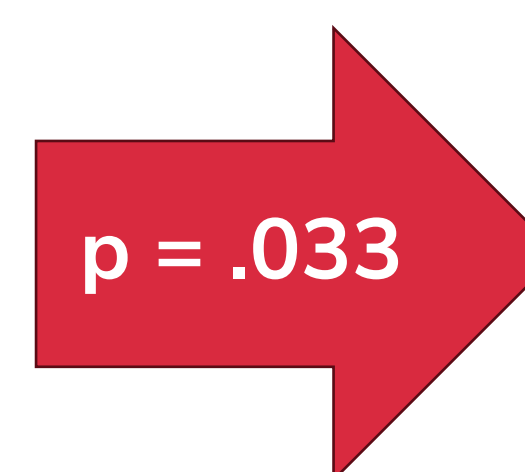
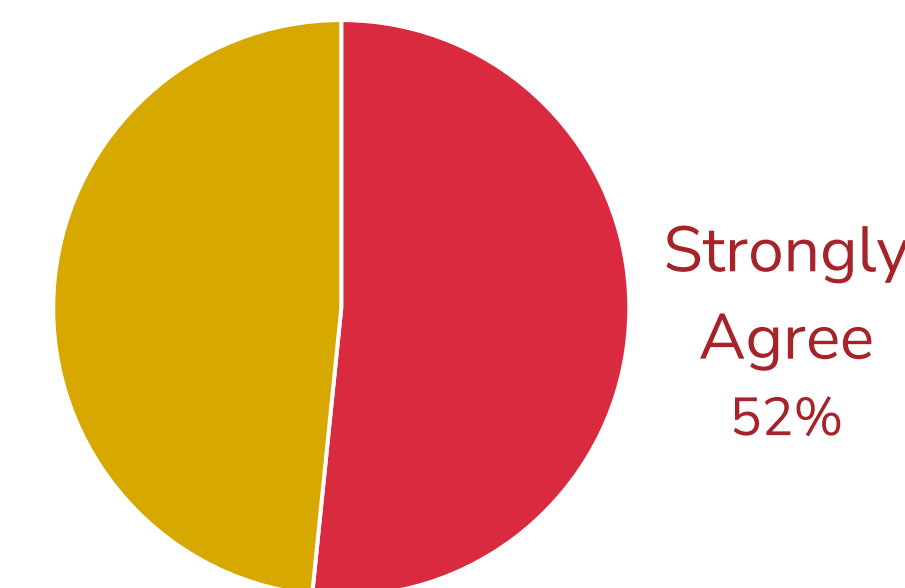
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QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

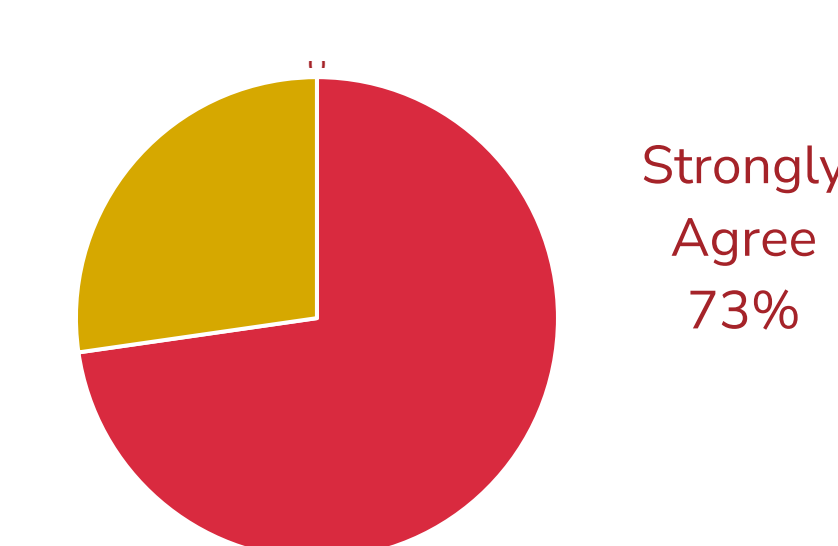


"I lead a purposeful and meaningful life."

BEFORE Volunteering



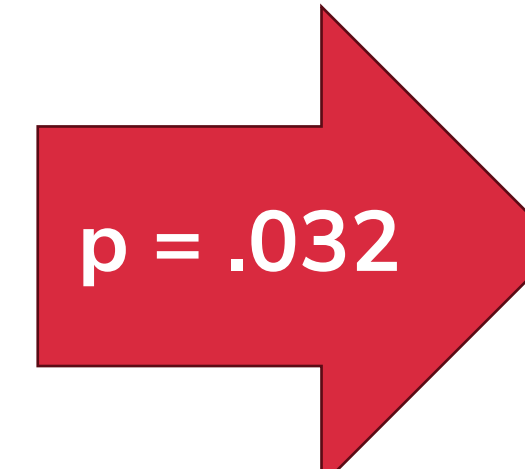
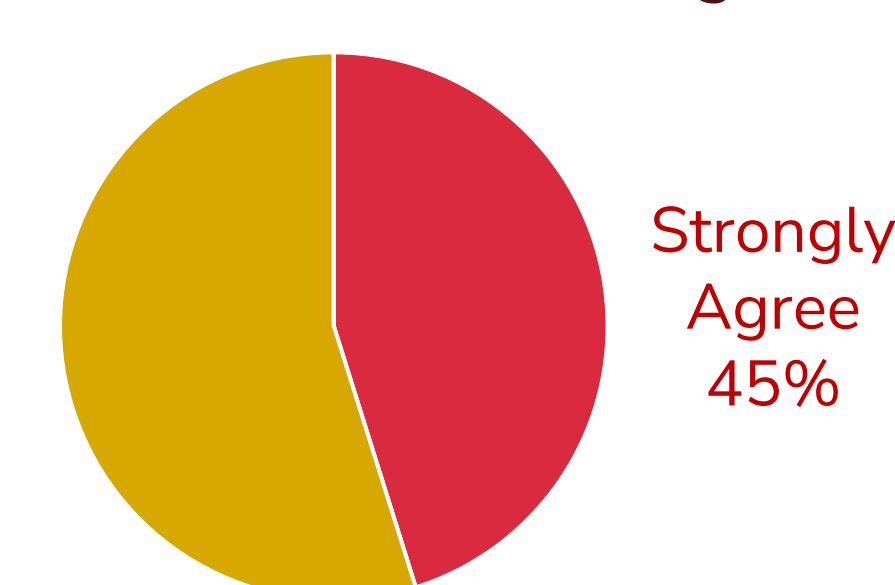
AFTER Volunteering



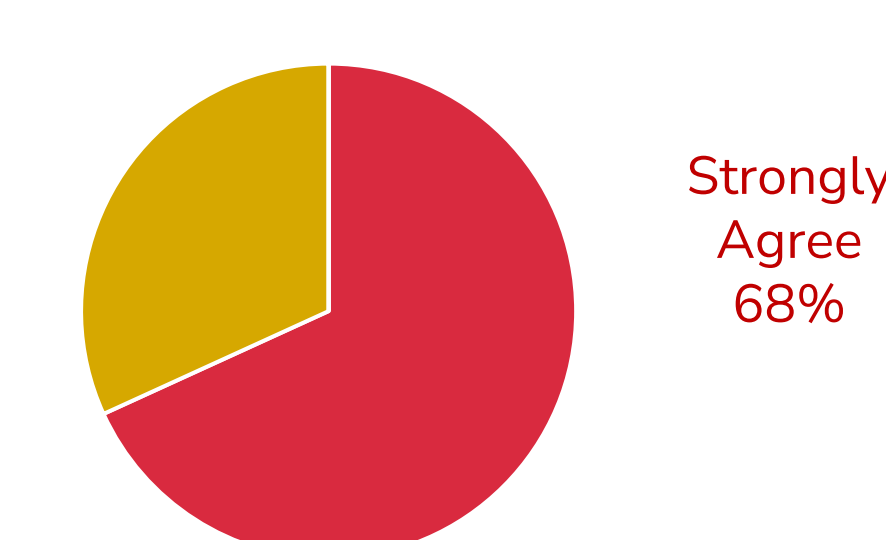
Null hypothesis = Work as a volunteer does not cause changes in well-being (or survey answers). Number of students who "strongly agree" with the above statement before their experience working as a volunteer at the health clinic (16 of 31 respondents) was compared with number of students who "strongly agree" after 4 or more months of working as a volunteer (16 of 22 respondents). Chi square analysis determined that the probability of this difference occurring randomly is less than 5% (indicates that statistically significant change occurred.)

"I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others."

BEFORE Volunteering



AFTER Volunteering



Null hypothesis = Work as a volunteer does not cause changes in well-being (or survey answers). Number of students who "strongly agree" with the above statement before their experience working as a volunteer at the health clinic (14 of 31 respondents) was compared with the number of students who "strongly agree" after 4 or more months of working as a volunteer (15 of 22 respondents). Chi square analysis determined that the probability of this difference occurring randomly is less than 5% (indicates that statistically significant change occurred.)