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THE MOTIVATIONS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DANCE MARATHON

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Background

In modern times, demand for nonprofit volunteers frequently exceeds supply. The National Center for Charitable Statistics states that more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations were registered with the IRS in 2015, a 10.4% growth since 2005 (McKeever, 2018). Volunteer and donation rates are not only failing to keep pace with this growth but have experienced declines of almost 4% and 11%, respectively (Grimm & Dietz, 2018). For this reason, research on the motivation of volunteers is more important than ever (Francis, 2011). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS; 2015) reports that the national volunteer rate is declining, with only about 1 in 4 Americans volunteering at least once in a calendar year. According to the University of Maryland's Do Good Institute, the likelihood of volunteering decreases by almost 8% as individuals develop from adolescence into young adulthood (Grimm & Dietz, 2018). Despite almost 77.5% of college first years rating "helping others" as "essential" or "very important" (Eagan et al., 2017), volunteer rates were lowest among young adults aged 20–24 (BLS, 2015), with fewer than 1 in 5 volunteering annually. Young adults are critical for organizations' expansion and improvement, as it can be thought that those who help now will lead in the future (Francis, 2011).

Although definitions vary slightly throughout the literature, in this study, a young adult is defined as someone aged 19–24. Additionally, the majority of the studies cited have population samples comprised of the Millennial generation. The terms "young adults" and "Millennials" will thus be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

In 2017, annual individual giving in the United States totaled \$286.7 billion, accounting for 70% of all giving nationally (Giving USA, 2018). Annual giving has continued to grow in the past three years, and this growth trend and the magnitude of individual giving demonstrates the value that society places on charity. Although Millennials make up 25.9% of the population and account for only 11% of total charitable giving in the United States, 84% of Millennials give to charitable

organizations annually (Rovner, 2013). The cohort of young adult volunteers and donors, although important, is frequently overlooked in studies aimed to further understand motivations behind volunteering. Additionally, the explanation for low participation in volunteer efforts but high participation in fundraising or donating among young adults remains not fully characterized or understood.

University students are an even more valuable subcategory of this demographic, as volunteering is often closely aligned with future career benefits, and these students often have more free time than their fully employed peers (Berger & Milem, 2002; Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007). Over the past 30 years, there has been a change in how young adult college students spend their time. Time spent by college students on academics has decreased, while time spent in leisure, extracurricular activities, and employment have increased (Babcock & Marks, 2011). With this rise in free time, it is increasingly interesting and important to understand the motivations behind how students allocate their time. Without an understanding of student motivation to participate in philanthropy, it is virtually impossible to reverse the decline in participation.

Miracle Network Dance Marathon

One of the most successful examples of student philanthropy is the Dance Marathon. The Miracle Network Dance Marathon movement began with a single dance marathon at Indiana University (IU) in 1991. The original marathon was held in memory of Ryan White, who passed away from HIV/AIDS before he was to start college at IU. White often spoke out and advocated for HIV/AIDS education. The Dance Marathon (DM) organization was started by his friends, in response to their promise to keep his memory alive, and was to benefit Riley Hospital for Children, where White received treatment.

The first marathon raised \$10,900, but beyond that, it started a movement that continues today. Three years after the inaugural marathon, the Children's Miracle Network Hospital (CMN) organization approached the Indiana University Dance Marathon (IUDM) and its founder, Jill Stewart, and asked for permission to expand the IUDM fundraising model to universities across North America. Today, the Miracle Network Dance Marathon movement spans North America, with more than 350 participating universities benefitting hundreds of hospitals across the country. The typical dance marathon engages students year-round to raise funds and awareness for their local CMN hospitals. The year culminates with a "dance marathon" event in which students get to meet patient families treated at their local hospital, participate in games and dancing, enjoy entertainment, and reveal their

annual fundraising total. Each DM organization is entirely student-run, and 100% of all funds raised go directly to a local CMN hospital (E. Phipps, personal communication, April 21, 2017).

All of the DMs that were part of this study raise money for Riley Hospital for Children. Riley serves patients from all 92 Indiana counties, and children from all over the world come to Riley to receive treatment. Nationally ranked in all 10 pediatric specialties, Riley is recognized by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the nation's top children's hospitals. Riley Dance Marathon is the largest and highest-fundraising CMN DM program, with more than 24% of CMN's funds raised by Riley DMs. Together, Riley's 80 DMs raised 6.5 million dollars in the 2015–2016 school year, with more than 15,000 participants (E. Phipps, personal communication, April 21, 2017).

Millennial Motivations

Based on the demographic age and class standing of a typical undergraduate student, most participants in this study at the time of data collection were born between 1994 and 1998. This makes this cohort on the edge of being categorized as Millennials or as a part of early Generation Z. Further, the majority of student participants over the history of Dance Marathon have been Millennials.

Millennials and their intrinsic motivations have been studied at great length. In general, they participate in philanthropy because of a commitment to their community and belief in their ability to make a change. Passion for the cause is their primary motivator. They are initially motivated to give by engaging storytelling and by seeing the long-term effects of their gifts (Feldmann, 2017).

As a whole, the nonprofit sector today is facing fundamental issues in recruiting and maintaining sufficient volunteer staff and funding (Francis, 2011). The Children's Miracle Network Dance Marathon movement, however, has attracted more than one million active student participants nationwide, and it raised close to \$27 million last year as one of the fastest peer-to-peer fundraising campaigns in the nation (Meardon, 2018). With the business of college life, an organization that has grown each year to engage the massive current levels of participation and success that CMN does *must* provide some unique reward or benefit to participants. The objective of this study is to characterize the motivations and perceived benefit of young adult college student involvement in DMs.

Methodology

Measurements

A mixed-methods approach was used to examine participants' perceptions and to measure and analyze relationships. Qualtrics Survey software was used to build and distribute the survey. The survey consisted of 22 questions divided into four categories titled Demographics, What is involvement with Dance Marathon, The DM impact, and Perceived benefit of involvement with DM. The demographics section consisted of multiple-choice questions about gender, year in school, and school. Participants were also asked about involvement with DM before high school, and their participation level each year that they have been involved with DM. Free-response questions gauged first impressions of DM, how other people described DM to them, and expectations before participation, used to categorize how initial expectations influenced participant motivations.

To qualify the motivations and perceived benefits of involvement in DM, it was necessary to define DM involvement for the sample group. The second section of the survey included questions about the amount of time spent fundraising, amount of time per week committed to DM, and personal fundraising goals and actual totals. Participants were then asked 20 of the 30 Likert-scale questions identified in Clary and Snyder's (1999) Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), which, with more than 1,200 citations, has become a gold standard for understanding volunteer motivations. Questions were limited to increase the response rate. Participants were asked to rank their agreement to multiple statements that would reveal one of the six motivation types defined by the VFI, including "I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself" (Values), "Participating in DM makes me feel important" (Enhancement), "Participating in DM allows me to gain a new perspective on things" (Understanding), "I participated in DM to make my resume look good" (Career), and "I've made new friends by participating in DM" (Social). Responses for each motivation were combined to form a cumulative score for each participant. Participants received positive values for questions in which they were in agreement (somewhat agree = 1, agree = 2, and strongly agree = 3), 0 points for "neither agree nor disagree," and negative points for those with which they were in disagreement (somewhat disagree = -1, disagree = -2, strongly disagree = -3). If a statement was skipped or was marked "NA/Prefer not to answer," the participant received no score for the entire category in which the statement belonged. Scores were divided by the possible number of questions per category of motivation. Average scores for each category

were then reported for the sample. VFI questions corresponding to the protective motivation were left off this section of the survey unintentionally, so only five of the six motivations are reported.

Participants were also asked to rank their motivations for participating in DM on a scale from 1 to 6, with 1 indicating their top motivator. They were offered the following choices based on themes from the VFI: Values, Protective, Enhancement, Understanding, Career, and Social. The motivations were defined in the following way:

- *Values*: express and act on humanitarian or altruistic tendencies
- *Protective*: protect the ego from negative features of the self and negative feelings
- *Enhancement*: develop and expand the positive aspects of one's ego
- *Understanding*: learn and practice life knowledge, skills, and abilities
- *Career*: develop, prepare, and maintain career-related skills
- *Social*: be with friends and do something that important others view favorably

Finally, the survey included a series of free-response questions asking participants to define how they have matured, what skills they have gained, what makes DM different, and their primary motivation in one word. Free responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method used to find repeated patterns within the data set. This study used the six phases detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to complete thematic analysis: become familiar with data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, name themes, and produce report. Each response could be categorized in multiple themes if applicable.

Statistical analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23.0 (SPSS v23.0). Continuous data were described using mean and standard deviation (SD) for variables considered to be normally distributed, and median and interquartile range (IQR) for variables considered to be non-normally distributed. Groupwise demographic and respondent characteristics were compared using independent sample two-tailed t-tests, chi-square analyses, or Mann-Whitney tests for nonparametric data. P values < 0.05 were considered to be statistically significant. The study was given exempt approval from the university's institutional review board.

Sample

The survey was distributed to three IUDM programs. E-mail lists of registered DM participants were obtained from two universities and invitations, and participation reminders were delivered by e-mail. The survey was distributed to the third university by the organization president through an anonymous link because of the school's student privacy policies. School A is a state-assisted residential university of 17,000 undergraduate students. School A Dance Marathon is 10 years old and currently stands in the second-highest fundraising bracket recognized by CMN DM staff: \$450,000–\$999,999. School B is a private, liberal arts, residential university of 4,500 undergraduate students. School B's Dance Marathon was the second DM program in Indiana after the original IUDM. At 18 years since it was founded, the program is in the middle fundraising bracket (\$250,000–\$449,999) and was recognized in CMN's top fundraising schools per capita. School C is a state-assisted university of 22,000 students, with 89% of students commuting to campus. School C Dance Marathon is celebrating its 17th year and fundraises in the second-highest fundraising bracket: \$450,000–\$999,999. Because surveys were distributed by anonymous links, it was not possible to send follow-up e-mails to participants from School C. This may have resulted in lower response rates.

Results

Sample

The survey was distributed to 1492 participants in total. There were 161 respondents, for an 11% response rate. The majority of study participants were female (85%). Participants were more diverse in their class year, with representation from all grades. All participant types were represented, and at relative frequencies representative of the population. General members and committee members participated at the highest rates. The majority of respondents became involved with DM for the first time in college. General demographics are described in Table 1.

Participant Demographics		
Gender		
	Participants (n)	Percent (%)
Female	136	85.0
Year		
First Year	42	26.1
Sophomore	52	32.3
Junior	32	19.9
Senior	29	18.0
Graduate School	2	1.2
Other	4	2.5
Participant Type		
General Member	78	48.4
Committee Member	92	57.1
Mid-level Leadership	27	16.8
Executive Board	29	18.0
High School Dance Marathon Participant		
Yes	37	23.0
No	124	77.0

Table 1. Cumulative Participant Demographics from Schools A–C.

What is Involvement in Dance Marathon?

For survey participants, DM involved a weekly time commitment of about 1 hour for an average of 4 to 5 months (Table 2). It also was defined by significant fundraising commitment. On average, participants set fundraising goals of \$741.22 and actually fundraised \$734.84 (Table 2).

	Mean
Fundraising Time (months)	4.50
Weekly Commitment (hours)	1.00
Fundraising Goal (USD)	\$741.22
Actual Fundraising Total (USD)	\$734.84

Table 2. Dance Marathon Involvement

Motivations to be Involved

In response to a free-response question asking what about DM had originally interested participants, three themes emerged: DM supported a good cause (Values, 71.2%), their friends were doing it or it was a way to make friends (Social, 39.6%), and the networking or resume-building potential (Career, 15.3%; Table 3).

	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 111)	Percent	95% CI
Values	79	71.2	62.8%–79.6%
Social	44	39.6	30.5%–48.7%
Career	17	15.3	8.6%–22.0%

Table 3. Initial Motivation for Involvement with Dance Marathon

Many participants noted two of the three themes simultaneously, as demonstrated by the following participant responses:

I really wanted to participate to help out kids and have fun with friends.

A lot of my friends were doing it and also I wanted to join a club that focused on making a positive difference.

I have always had a passion for helping kids and I have always aspired to go into the medical pediatrics field. I became interested in DM because it gives me the opportunity to make a huge impact on those kids’ lives even before I have the schooling and training to work with them.

Major themes of respondents’ first impressions of DM before becoming involved with the organization included a unique organization atmosphere noted specifically as fun, inspiring, and/or passionate. One participant summarized general themes among participating, saying, “Dance Marathon was full of passionate people who cared about something that was pertinent in my life, Riley Hospital for Children. The exec team was great and made me fired up to raise money FTK [for the kids]!” Participants also noticed the impact of the organization,

the large reach of DM across campus and the way it united the campus, and the excellent execution of events and meetings (Table 4).

	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 133)	Percent (%)	95% CI
Organization Atmosphere	93	69.9	62.1%–77.7%
Organization Impact	59	44.4	36.0%–52.8%
Organization Reach	44	33.1	25.1%–41.1%
Organization Execution	10	7.5	3.0%–12.0%

Table 4. First Impressions of Dance Marathon

When using the VFI questionnaire, respondents most experienced the Values function (median = 3), Understanding function (median = 2.17), and Social function (median = 2), as shown in Table 5. The maximum score was 3. Median scores for each statement are reported in Table 6.

	Median	IQR
Values	3.00	2.67–3.00
Enhancement	1.67	1.00–3.00
Understanding	2.17	1.67–3.00
Career	1.50	0.50–2.25
Social	2.00	1.50–2.75

Table 5. Motivations for Involvement with Dance Marathon (VFI Questionnaire)

Statement	Median Agreement Score	IQR
I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself. (Values)	3.0	2.0–3.0
I feel compassion toward people in need. (Values)	3.0	3.0–3.0
I feel it is important to help others. (Values)	3.0	3.0–3.0
Participating in DM makes me feel important. (Enhancement)	2.0	1.0–3.0
Participating in DM increases my self-esteem. (Enhancement)	2.0	1.0–3.0
Participating in DM makes me feel needed. (Enhancement)	2.0	1.0–3.0
Participating in DM allows me to gain a new perspective on things. (Understanding)	3.0	2.0–3.0
By participating in DM, I learned how to interact and communicate with a variety of people. (Understanding)	2.0	1.0–3.0
By participating in DM, I explored my strengths. (Understanding)	2.0	1.0–3.0
Participating in DM helped me make new contacts that might help my business or career. (Career)	2.0	0.0–3.0
Participating in DM allowed me to explore different career options. (Career)	1.0	0.0–3.0
Participating in DM will help me succeed in my chosen profession. (Career)	2.0	0.0–3.0

I participated in DM to make my resume look good. (Career)	2.0	0.0-3.0
My friends participate in DM. (Social)	2.0	2.0-3.0
People I am close to wanted me to participate in DM. (Social)	2.0	1.0-3.0
People I am close to place a high value on service and philanthropy. (Social)	2.0	2.0-3.0
I've made new friends by participating in DM. (Social)	2.0	1.3-3.0

Table 6. Modified VFI Scores (maximum agreement score = 3.0)

While all other questions allowed participants to combine multiple motivators into their responses, the final question required participants to summarize their motivations into one word or phrase. The majority of respondents (86.9%) answered this question with a word about the cause or the kids at Riley Hospital for Children. The other themes were mentioned at frequencies of less than 10% (Table 7). Responses mentioning an innate or external responsibility to participate were categorized together under the requirement theme.

Motivation	Frequency (n = 107)	Percent (%)	95% CI
Cause	93	86.9	80.5%–93.3%
Requirement	7	6.5	1.8%–11.2%
Social	7	6.5	1.8%–11.2%
Positive Emotions	6	5.6	1.2%–10.0%
Personal Benefit	3	2.8	0.0%–5.9%

Table 7. Primary Motivations for Involvement with Dance Marathon

Perceived Benefits of Participation

There was general agreement among respondents that they gained new skills (93.6%) and matured or developed (86.4%) as a result of involvement with DM. More specifically, participants reported developing skills and aptitudes in three general categories: social skills, career-related skills, and emotional intelligence (Table 8). Some statements about skills are shown below.

I have learned valuable communication skills from being on a committee. I have also learned persistence through our fundraising days. It can get hard to keep getting turned down when asking for donations, but you develop that never-give-up attitude because you are so passionate about the cause.

I have gained increased skills in communication and skills in planning during my time especially as a committee member. I have also learned skills in developing meaningful relationships as well. This organization really gives you the opportunity to connect with people over something amazing beyond superficial connections.

Both my ability to communicate and my ability to empathize with others have improved.

[I have improved at] working as a team, fundraising, motivational speaking, working with corporations.

Skill	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 110)	Percent (%)	95% CI
Any Skills	103	93.6	89.0%–98.2%
Social Skills	49	44.5	35.2%–53.8%
Career-Related Skills	44	42.7	33.5%–51.9%
Emotional Intelligence	31	30.1	21.5%–38.7%

Table 8. Skills Developed through Involvement with Dance Marathon

Respondents noted improved emotional intelligence, development of transferable aptitudes, and improved life outlook or gratitude for their health or lives (Table 9). Transferable aptitudes mentioned included leadership, confidence, creativity, and communication skills. The impact of this development is best understood through the following direct quotes:

I believe I now have a different outlook on life. I never take being healthy for granted. I am a more positive individual. I wake up every morning thankful and I say prayers for those who do not have the opportunity to wake up in the comforts of their own bed.

I feel like I have heard stories and saw videos that have shown me that life could be much worse. I have learned to complain less and to live more.

My communication skills have significantly developed thanks to DM. By constantly fundraising, I become comfortable talking/approaching strangers, developing passion, and becoming more confident in who I am and my purpose for this world.

Development	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 108)	Percent %	95% CI
Any Development	95	86.4	79.9%–92.9%
Emotional Intelligence	49	44.5	35.1%–53.9%
Transferable Aptitudes	31	28.2	19.7%–36.7%
Improved Outlook/Gratitude	29	26.4	18.1%–34.7%

Table 9. Developments or Maturation through Involvement with Dance Marathon

What Makes Dance Marathon Different from other Organizations?

When participants were asked what made DM different from other organizations, many respondents (58.3%) mentioned the large impact the organization can have, as well as being able to directly see that impact (Table 10).

For example, one participant stated, “It is an all-in or all-out thing. If you choose to participate, you have to be fully committed and all FTK. We also truly make an impact, and by interacting with all of the Riley families, we can really see that.”

Differences	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 108)	Percent (%)	95% CI
Impact	63	58.3	49.0%–67.6%
Community	57	52.9	43.5%–62.3%
Passion	39	36.1	27.0%–45.2%
Longevity	11	10.2	4.5%–15.9%

Table 10. Major Differences between Dance Marathon and Other Organizations

Another major theme was the inclusivity and community aspect of the organization (52.8%):

Dance marathon accepts everyone for who they are, and we’re all a bunch of people with one really important goal.

It has a better sense of joy and a bigger internal result than any other organization I am in. It is more of a family than an organization. A family that fights, disagrees, cries together, but in the end, make each other better and love always.

Finally, participants mentioned the energy and passion present (36.1%). For example, one participant stated, “I truly believe that Dance Marathon is different from others because of the passion level that everyone brings to the table. It shines through more than anything I have ever seen.”

Discussion

In general, the study sample was representative of the DM population. Most DM programs nationally are female-dominated. The sample had a moderate involvement level demonstrating a significant time commitment and effort in fundraising. This level of commitment is consistent with the drastic differences I noticed between DM involvement and other nonprofit involvement. The effort put

forth is significant enough to require a degree of prioritization that demands the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that I was interested in studying.

All measures characterizing types of motivations to participate reveal that DM appeals to all different kinds of volunteer functions simultaneously. Most closely aligned to the DM model are the Values, Understanding, and Social functions. This demonstrates that most DM participants in this sample participate to express or act on important values, to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are often unused, or to strengthen social relationships (Francis, 2011). In other questions revealing motivations, participants usually mentioned more than one motivation type. When asked to choose their primary motivation to participate, however, the overwhelming majority indicated the cause or impact on the cause. Further, most participants used the program's national slogan, "For The Kids," or "FTK."

Most participants reported that they developed skills or matured as a result of participation, revealing that DM programs are able to massively influence not only the cause but also participants themselves. Interestingly, only about 15% of participants mentioned desiring these developments in their original interest in DM, implying that personal benefit is usually not a motivator to participate, although it is an added benefit.

The differences noticed by participants between DM and other organizations align closely with what is known about Millennials' motivations. All DM programs surveyed include families affected by the hospital in their event. Participants can meet families and directly see the fruits of their efforts. More, with inclusive environments and relationship building, communities can form. Previous studies demonstrate that Millennials feel a responsibility to help the communities to which they belong.

It is not surprising that an organization structure created by Millennials and sustained by Millennials is able to attract and retain their peers at rates superior to those of other nonprofit organizations. The attractiveness and success of DM programs can be applied to recruitment and retention within the nonprofit sector. First impressions are critical. Using enthusiastic and passionate recruiters could be successful at creating initial engagement and developing interest in college students. Desired outcomes must be specific, clear, and visible when possible. Finally, with a calendar and an environment that fosters the creation of community through inclusivity, familiarity, and accountability, Millennial participants are more likely to feel a responsibility to the cause.

Limitations

Because some DM programs consider their participants donors, confidentiality and donor privacy rules limited recruitment to this study. Including programs from other hospital markets could reveal different findings. Riley Hospital and Dance Marathon are household names for many in Indiana, and there may be important differences between Indiana DM participants and DM participants across North America.

The bulk of the data in this study was taken from a thematic analysis of free-response questions. All responses were analyzed by only one researcher. Additionally, because the questions were open-ended, it is possible that participants experienced different developments or motivations that they did not articulate.

The missing data from the protective section of the VFI within the DM-impact section limited analysis of the consistency between participant responses and the overall analysis of sample motivations. Moreover, participants were asked to rank their motivations from 1 to 6, which was difficult to analyze collectively; only primary motivations (those marked 1) were able to be analyzed.

Further Directions

To date, no other studies have been published on the phenomenon that is the success of Dance Marathon. A larger sample size including a wider variety of program sizes from across the country could help better characterization of DM participants' motivations. Many of the free-response questions could be made multiple-choice after this initial sampling, hopefully increasing response rates and completion rates. Finally, the decrease in completion time achieved by reducing the number of free-response questions could allow for the complete VFI to be used.

Conclusion

Despite the overwhelming agreement that participants *do* benefit as a result of participation with DM, participants do not seem to be driven by these perceived benefits. College students' primary motivations to participate are altruistic values and the cause itself: Riley Hospital for Children. The DM model includes aspects that align with what is known about Millennials' motivations to volunteer. Continuing to better understand the motivations of volunteers and donors in the nonprofit sector is critical for the sector to survive. Better categorizing motivations

to participate in DM and Dance Marathon's attractiveness for the Millennial generation could lead to profitable applications for other nonprofit companies.

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