

Connecting Intentions to Actions: A Review of Personal Motivation and University Students' Volunteering Behaviors

SongQingnan^{1,2}, Tan Sri Dato' Wira Dr. Mohd Shukri Bin Ab Yajid^{3*}, Jacqueline Tham⁴

¹Ph.D. Candidate, Graduate School of Management Postgraduate Centre Management and Science University Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

²Lecturer, Qiqihar University, Qiqihar 161006, Heilongjiang Province, China

³Professor, Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴Associate professor, Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100, Selangor, Malaysia

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*Corresponding Author: Tan Sri Dato' Wira Dr. Mohd Shukri Bin Ab Yajid

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Abstract

Review Article

This review explores the multifaceted relationship between personal motivation, volunteering intention, and actual volunteer behavior among university students. Drawing on theoretical models such as Self-Determination Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study categorizes personal motivation into six core dimensions: learning to understand, career development, value expression, self-improvement, self-protection, and social interaction. Volunteering intention is positioned as a psychological mediator that translates these motivational drivers into sustained engagement in civic service. Empirical evidence from recent domestic and international studies highlights the diverse forms and frequencies of student volunteering, along with contextual influences such as campus culture, policy support, and emotional resonance. The findings reveal that value-driven and growth-oriented motivations are most predictive of long-term participation. The review also identifies methodological gaps, such as the lack of longitudinal analysis and limited exploration of informal volunteering. Implications are offered for universities and volunteer organizations to enhance student engagement through tailored interventions, recognition systems, and supportive environments. Future research directions call for deeper cross-cultural comparisons and dynamic models of intention evolution.

Keywords: University Students, Volunteering Behavior, Personal Motivation, Volunteering Intention, Experiential Learning, Career Development, Value Expression, Self-Improvement, Self-Protection, Social Interaction, Theory of Planned Behavior, Self-Determination Theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering has become an essential pillar of civic engagement and social development, particularly within university populations. As emerging leaders and professionals, students' involvement in volunteer activities not only contributes to societal welfare but also promotes personal growth, empathy, and a sense of civic responsibility. In recent years, the strategic integration of volunteerism into higher education curricula has further emphasized its significance in fostering holistic student development (Tang et al., 2023).

Volunteer behavior is shaped by a multifaceted interplay of personal motivations, encompassing altruistic values, career aspirations, and social affiliations. The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) framework identifies six core

motivational dimensions: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement (Clary et al., 1998; Cui et al., 2022). These dimensions reflect the diverse psychological drivers behind volunteer engagement, which vary across individuals and contexts. Empirical studies have demonstrated that such motivational heterogeneity influences both the initiation and sustainability of volunteer participation (Yang & Zhu, 2021).

While motivation serves as the initial catalyst for volunteer behavior, intention functions as a critical psychological intermediary between motivation and actual engagement. Volunteer intention represents an individual's readiness and commitment to participate in service activities, thereby mediating the relationship between motivational factors



and behavioral outcomes (Ho et al., 2020). Incorporating intention as a mediating variable offers a more nuanced understanding of how distinct motivational dimensions translate into sustained volunteer action (He, 2020).

This conceptual framework underscores the importance of examining both motivational structures and intention in predicting long-term volunteer engagement among university students. Future research should further explore the dynamic interactions between these constructs to inform the design of targeted interventions and educational programs that promote enduring civic involvement.

2. DIMENSIONS OF PERSONAL MOTIVATION

Personal motivation is defined as the internal psychological forces that initiate, direct, and sustain behavior toward goals that are personally meaningful. It encompasses both conscious decisions and unconscious impulses that reflect one's values, emotional needs, self-concept, and aspirations. Unlike external incentives, which are often transactional or situational, personal motivation is anchored in intrinsic drives—such as the pursuit of growth, autonomy, competence, and life purpose. These motivational forces are shaped by lived experiences, cultural background, and individual personality traits. As Holding and Koestner (2023) note, personal goal motivation significantly impacts how long people persist, how well they perform, and how satisfied they feel across the entire lifespan of goal striving, from the moment of intention to possible disengagement.

In the context of volunteering and civic engagement among university students, personal motivation can be disaggregated into six distinct dimensions. Learning to understand refers to the desire for experiential knowledge and cognitive enrichment. Career development captures motivation to gain practical skills, explore professions, and enhance employability. Value expression is characterized by the urge to enact ethical beliefs such as altruism, justice, and civic duty. Self-improvement relates to personal growth, emotional resilience, and psychological efficacy. Self-protection denotes the use of volunteering as a coping strategy to manage stress, anxiety, or social isolation. Lastly, social interaction reflects the pursuit of interpersonal connection, belonging, and relational fulfillment. Each of these dimensions offers unique insight into why individuals choose to engage in volunteer activities beyond surface-level incentives.

These facets of personal motivation align closely with theoretical models such as Self-Determination Theory, which underscores the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, Pincus (2023) presents a comprehensive structure that organizes human needs across four life domains—Self, Material, Social, and Spiritual—intersecting with functional levels (To Be, To Do, To Have). This matrix yields 12 distinct motivational archetypes and reinforces the idea that motivation is multidimensional and deeply contextual. Together, these frameworks suggest that personal motivation in volunteering is neither static nor uniform but shaped by a complex interplay between inner needs and external environments.

Learning to understand

Learning to Understand refers to the process by which individuals acquire deeper cognitive, emotional, and social insights through active participation in volunteer experiences. It is a form of experiential learning that goes beyond the passive absorption of information, emphasizing intentional engagement with real-world contexts to foster intellectual growth, personal development, and civic awareness. This dimension of personal motivation involves not only the acquisition of factual knowledge but also the cultivation of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and reflective thinking. Volunteers learn by doing—immersing themselves in unfamiliar environments, interacting with diverse populations, and confronting complex social issues. Such experiences challenge preconceived notions and encourage individuals to critically examine their values, assumptions, and roles within society. This learning process is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from fields such as sociology, psychology, education, and ethics to shape a holistic understanding of society and the self. For instance, service-learning programs have been shown to promote transformative learning outcomes, including enhanced critical thinking and moral reasoning (Meyers, 2020). In humanitarian contexts, guided self-help interventions embedded in volunteer work have demonstrated measurable improvements in psychological resilience and wellbeing (Tol et al., 2020). Moreover, long-term international volunteering has been found to foster global competencies and intercultural understanding, particularly among university students engaged in development work abroad (Mimaki, 2025). These findings suggest that volunteering is not merely a form of altruistic action but a pedagogical tool that cultivates lifelong learning and social consciousness.

In practice, volunteering as a platform for experiential learning has been widely recognized for its transformative potential. Through direct service, individuals often develop critical thinking skills and broaden their perspectives on societal structures, cultural diversity, and human behavior. Service-learning programs, for instance, integrate academic instruction with community engagement, allowing students to apply theoretical concepts in practical settings while fostering civic responsibility and personal growth (Meyers, 2020). In humanitarian contexts, guided self-help interventions embedded in volunteer work have demonstrated measurable improvements in psychological resilience and wellbeing, particularly among displaced populations (Tol et al., 2020). Moreover, recent efforts to redesign volunteer programs into structured experiential learning opportunities—such as those incorporating Kolb's learning cycle—have shown that reflection, goal-setting, and feedback mechanisms significantly enhance learning outcomes and professional readiness (Trottier-Scully & Ritchie, 2021). These experiences challenge volunteers to move beyond surface-level participation, encouraging them to analyze their actions, adapt to new challenges, and internalize the values of service and social justice.

Career development

Career development, in the context of volunteering,



refers to the process by which individuals acquire professional competencies, explore vocational interests, and enhance employability through service-based experiences. It encompasses both the intentional pursuit of career-related skills and the incidental learning that occurs through real-world engagement. Volunteering offers a unique environment for testing career paths, building confidence, and developing a professional identity, often in ways that formal education alone cannot provide.

Volunteering enables individuals to cultivate a wide range of transferable skills, including leadership, communication, time management, and problem-solving, which are highly valued in the labor market. Structured volunteer programs often function as informal apprenticeships, providing hands-on experience in organizational settings that mirror professional environments (Chui, 2020). These experiences allow volunteers to clarify career goals, expand professional networks, and demonstrate initiative and adaptability—traits that are increasingly sought after by employers. The CLAP@JC framework further emphasizes the role of volunteering in career and life development, highlighting how service activities can align personal aspirations with community needs to foster meaningful career trajectories (CLAP@JC, 2023).

Recent empirical studies have reinforced the link between volunteering and career advancement. For example, Kanar, Oliver, and Bouckennooghe (2025) found that volunteers at large-scale events developed both soft and technical skills, with the effectiveness of skill acquisition influenced by motivational orientation and supervisor support. Similarly, the United Nations Volunteer Learning and Development Plan outlines how volunteering contributes to lifelong learning and professional growth by offering opportunities for exposure, experience, and education in diverse contexts (UNV, 2020). These findings suggest that volunteering is not only a form of civic engagement but also a strategic avenue for career development, particularly when supported by intentional learning pathways and reflective practices.

Volunteering has increasingly become a strategic tool for career exploration, particularly among university students and early-career professionals. It allows individuals to engage in meaningful work while simultaneously acquiring transferable skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication, and project management. Structured volunteer programs often function as informal apprenticeships, offering hands-on experience that complements academic learning (Chui, 2020). The CLAP@JC framework emphasizes the alignment of personal aspirations with community needs, positioning volunteering as a bridge between self-discovery and career readiness (CLAP@JC, 2023). Recent empirical studies have further validated this connection. For example, Kanar, Oliver, and Bouckennooghe (2025) found that volunteers at large-scale events developed both soft and hard skills—ranging from adaptability and professionalism to technical expertise—depending on their motives and the level of supervisor support. These findings suggest that volunteering not only enhances employability but also fosters career adaptability and lifelong learning, especially when embedded within supportive organizational structures.

Value expression

Value expression through volunteering refers to the enactment and reinforcement of personal ethical beliefs, such as altruism, justice, compassion, and civic responsibility. It is the process by which individuals translate abstract moral principles into tangible social action, often within the framework of organizational missions and community needs (Fernandes, & de Matos, 2023). This dimension highlights the intrinsic motivations that drive individuals to serve, rooted in their desire to live authentically and contribute to the greater good.

Volunteering provides a powerful outlet for individuals to express and affirm their core values. When personal beliefs align with the mission and culture of a volunteer organization, individuals experience heightened engagement, satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Fernandes & Matos, 2023). This alignment reinforces moral identity and fosters a sense of purpose, making volunteering not just an act of service but a form of ethical self-expression. Moreover, recent research has shown that motivations—whether driven by recognition (credits) or social pressure (stigmas)—interact with personality traits to influence mental health outcomes (Chen et al., 2025). Volunteers motivated by value expression are particularly sensitive to organizational culture and societal perceptions, which can either validate or undermine their sense of moral agency. Kolnhofer Derecskei and Nagy (2020) further argue that employee volunteerism is deeply rooted in altruistic values and shaped by environmental factors such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and cultural norms. Their study emphasizes that value-driven volunteer behavior is not only a personal choice but also a reflection of broader ethical ecosystems, suggesting that organizations play a crucial role in facilitating meaningful value expression through structured and inclusive volunteer programs.

Self-improvement

Self-improvement, as a motivational dimension of volunteering, refers to the pursuit of personal growth through intentional engagement in service activities that challenge one's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral capacities. It involves the development of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-efficacy—qualities that contribute to an individual's ability to adapt, reflect, and thrive in diverse social contexts. Unlike externally driven achievements, self-improvement through volunteering is intrinsically motivated and often emerges from the process of helping others, navigating unfamiliar environments, and responding to real-world challenges (Giles-Mathis, 2023). This dimension is closely tied to identity formation, as individuals begin to see themselves not only as contributors to society but also as evolving agents of change.

Volunteering provides fertile ground for self-improvement by offering structured opportunities for reflection, feedback, and skill acquisition. West (2024) emphasizes that volunteer settings naturally create feedback loops, allowing individuals to learn from both successes and setbacks, which fosters continuous personal development. Ding and Zhong

(2020) further argue that social environments—particularly those that are crowded or high-pressure—can amplify self-improvement by pushing individuals beyond their comfort zones. Recent research also highlights the role of mindset and emotional experience in this process. Cho, Lee, and Kim (2023) found that volunteers with a growth mindset are more likely to experience nostalgia and positive emotions, which in turn reinforce their intention to continue volunteering and deepen their sense of personal fulfillment. Similarly, Post (2024) suggests that volunteering cultivates virtues such as empathy, mindfulness, and self-control, contributing to a more resilient and purpose-driven self. These findings underscore that self-improvement through volunteering is not merely incidental—it is a transformative journey shaped by reflection, emotional engagement, and meaningful social interaction.

Self-protection

Self-protection, in the context of volunteering, refers to the psychological mechanisms individuals activate to cope with emotional distress, anxiety, and social isolation through service engagement. It involves using volunteer activities as a structured outlet to manage internal stressors, build resilience, and regain a sense of control and purpose (Chen et al., 2024). This dimension is particularly relevant for individuals experiencing personal adversity, as volunteering offers a socially acceptable and constructive way to redirect emotional energy.

Volunteering has been increasingly recognized as a therapeutic tool for mental health recovery and emotional regulation. Structured service environments—such as peer-led initiatives, trauma-informed programs, and community outreach—provide volunteers with safe spaces to express emotions, build coping strategies, and foster psychological resilience. Santos (2021) highlights that self-protection strategies embedded in volunteer roles, including peer support and reflective practices, can mitigate psychological risks and reduce burnout. The World Health Organization (2020) further demonstrated that guided self-help interventions delivered through volunteer networks significantly reduced distress among refugees and individuals in crisis. More recently, Mayers et al. (2024) found that older adults who volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic reported lower levels of depression and loneliness compared to non-volunteers, suggesting that volunteering can serve as a low-cost, scalable intervention for mental health support. These findings affirm that volunteering is not only altruistic but also self-preserving—an act of healing through helping.

Social interaction

Social interaction, as a motivational dimension of volunteering, refers to the desire to build interpersonal relationships, expand social networks, and experience a sense of belonging through collaborative service (Ozharivska, 2023). It encompasses both formal and informal connections formed during volunteer activities, which contribute to emotional support, identity formation, and community integration.

Volunteering creates fertile ground for meaningful social engagement, especially among university students

navigating transitional life stages. It fosters empathy, teamwork, and shared purpose, which are essential for building trust and social cohesion. Lauer, Wong, and Yan (2025) conducted a scoping review showing that social infrastructure—such as community centers and volunteer organizations—plays a pivotal role in friendship formation and civic bonding. Liu, Zhu, and Li (2023) developed a model illustrating how individual-organizational interactions sustain voluntary service supply in China, emphasizing the role of relational dynamics in long-term engagement. Horsham et al. (2024) further confirmed a bidirectional relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, suggesting that strong social ties not only encourage participation but are also reinforced through it. These interactions enhance social capital, reduce feelings of isolation, and contribute to collective identity. In essence, volunteering transforms isolated individuals into connected citizens, strengthening the social fabric one relationship at a time.

3. VOLUNTEERING SERVICES INTENTION AS A MEDIATOR

Volunteering intention refers to an individual's psychological readiness and commitment to engage in unpaid service activities. It is commonly measured using self-report scales that assess willingness, planning, and perceived likelihood of participation (Kao et al., 2020). As a mediating variable, volunteering intention plays a pivotal role in bridging personal motivation and actual volunteering behavior. According to the Volunteer Process Model (Omoto & Snyder, 1995), intention translates motivational drives into concrete actions, making it a key predictor of sustained engagement.

Recent empirical studies have validated this mediating function. Zhang, Wang, and Liu (2025) demonstrated that community commitment and volunteer satisfaction significantly influence sustained volunteering intention, which in turn predicts long-term participation. Moreover, Cho, Lee, and Kim (2023) found that cognitive factors such as growth mindset and emotional factors like nostalgia positively affect volunteering intention through enhanced positive emotions. These findings underscore the psychological complexity of intention as a bridge between internal drives and external behavior.

Importantly, different dimensions of personal motivation exert varying degrees of influence on volunteering intention. Value-oriented motivations (e.g., altruism, civic duty) tend to have stronger predictive power than career-oriented or protective motives (Fernandes & Matos, 2023). Additionally, Liu, Zhu, and Li (2023) highlighted that social interaction motives significantly enhance intention when organizational support is present. This suggests that the effectiveness of motivational dimensions is context-dependent and mediated by perceived social and institutional factors.

4. UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' VOLUNTEERING BEHAVIOR

University students' volunteering behavior encompasses a wide range of activities, including community development, educational support, health promotion, and environmental protection. These behaviors manifest in both



formal and informal settings, often organized through university clubs, student unions, or external NGOs. According to Mustafa et al. (2020), the most common forms of student volunteering include episodic engagements such as participating in charity events, disaster relief, and educational outreach, with fewer students committing to long-term service roles. This trend reflects a shift toward flexible, short-term volunteering that aligns with students' academic schedules and personal interests.

Participation frequency among university students varies significantly. While a majority report engaging in volunteer activities at least once per semester, only a small proportion participate regularly—such as weekly or monthly (Mustafa et al., 2020). Cívico-Ariza et al. (2020) found that although students generally hold positive attitudes toward volunteering, actual participation rates remain low, often due to time constraints, lack of awareness, or limited institutional support. These findings highlight a gap between pro-social awareness and consistent behavioral engagement.

Several contextual factors influence students' volunteering behavior. Campus culture plays a pivotal role in shaping students' attitudes and norms toward service. Universities that integrate volunteerism into their educational philosophy—through service-learning curricula, recognition systems, and dedicated volunteer centers—tend to foster higher levels of engagement (Peng & Niu, 2024). Policy support is equally critical. For instance, mandatory volunteer service policies have been shown to increase students' service hours, academic performance, and employability outcomes (Zhang et al., 2023). Moreover, authentic leadership and a supportive organizational climate within volunteer programs enhance psychological capital and reinforce sustained participation (Wu & Xu, 2022).

The transformation of intention into action is a complex psychological process. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, Hua et al. (2023) demonstrated that students' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly predict their intention to volunteer, which in turn influences actual behavior. However, cognition—defined as understanding the personal and societal benefits of volunteering—does not directly lead to action but strengthens intention through its impact on attitudes and norms. Cho et al. (2023) further emphasized the role of emotional factors such as nostalgia and positive affect in reinforcing continuance intention, suggesting that meaningful and emotionally resonant experiences are key to sustaining volunteer engagement.

In summary, university students' volunteering behavior is shaped by a dynamic interplay of individual intention, institutional culture, policy frameworks, and emotional experiences. To bridge the gap between intention and action, universities must cultivate supportive environments that align students' values with accessible and rewarding service opportunities.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the psychological mechanisms underlying university students' volunteering behavior, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), Self-

Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and the Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). These models collectively explain how personal motivation influences volunteering intention, which in turn predicts actual behavior.

The TPB posits that behavioral intention is shaped by three core components: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of volunteering, students' attitudes (e.g., belief in the value of service), social pressure (e.g., peer or institutional encouragement), and perceived ability to participate (e.g., time or skill availability) jointly determine their intention to volunteer (Ajzen, 2002; Liang & Wu, 2023).

SDT complements this by emphasizing the role of intrinsic motivation and psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—in fostering sustained engagement. Volunteers who perceive their actions as self-endorsed and meaningful are more likely to develop strong intentions and continue participation (Wu et al., 2015; Haivas et al., 2013).

The Commitment-Trust Theory, originally developed in relationship marketing, has been extended to explain long-term volunteer engagement. It suggests that trust in the organization and emotional commitment to the community are key predictors of sustained intention (Zhang, Wang, & Liu, 2025). Satisfaction and perceived moral obligation also mediate the relationship between motivation and intention, reinforcing the psychological bridge between internal drives and external behavior (Liang & Wu, 2023).

By integrating these theories, the framework positions volunteering intention as a central mediating variable that translates multidimensional personal motivations—such as value expression, career development, and social interaction—into observable volunteering behavior. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how university students decide to engage in service and what sustains their participation over time.

6. REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

In recent years, empirical research on university students' volunteering behavior has expanded across multiple disciplines, including psychology, education, public health, and social governance. Internationally, studies have focused on the psychological benefits of volunteering, its role in civic engagement, and its impact on academic and career development. For example, Nichol et al. (2023) conducted an umbrella review of 28 systematic studies and found consistent evidence that volunteering improves mental health, social integration, and physical wellbeing, especially among youth and older adults. Similarly, Zhang, Wang, and Liu (2025) explored sustained volunteering intention in post-pandemic China, revealing that trust, satisfaction, and community commitment are key predictors of long-term engagement.

Domestically, Chinese scholars have increasingly examined the educational and developmental value of volunteering among university students. Chen, Li, and Li (2023) used a difference-in-differences approach to analyze data from a Beijing university and found that increased volunteer service hours significantly improved students' academic performance, teamwork ability, and employment

outcomes. Peng and Niu (2024) emphasized the role of campus culture and institutional support in shaping students' volunteering behavior, suggesting that service-learning integration and recognition systems enhance participation.

Methodologically, most studies adopt quantitative designs, including structural equation modeling (SEM), regression analysis, and longitudinal tracking. For instance, Chang et al. (2023) applied Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to examine how self-efficacy, satisfaction, and social support influence science volunteers' career interests. Their SEM results confirmed that these cognitive variables significantly mediate the relationship between volunteering experience and career orientation. In contrast, some studies employ mixed-methods approaches to capture the nuanced motivations and emotional experiences of volunteers (Wondimu & Admas, 2024).

Despite these advances, several limitations persist. First, many studies rely on cross-sectional data, limiting causal inference. Second, the overrepresentation of formal volunteering neglects the impact of informal or episodic service. Third, cultural and contextual differences are often underexplored, especially in comparative studies between Western and Asian populations. Moreover, volunteer intention is frequently treated as a static construct, ignoring its dynamic evolution over time.

Future research should address these gaps by adopting longitudinal designs, incorporating qualitative insights, and expanding the scope to include diverse forms of volunteering. There is also a need to explore the interplay between personal motivation dimensions and institutional factors, such as policy incentives and leadership styles. Additionally, comparative studies across regions and cultures can enrich theoretical models and inform more inclusive volunteer management strategies.

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This review highlights the pivotal role of personal motivation and volunteering intention in shaping university students' engagement in volunteer services. Drawing on multidimensional motivational frameworks and behavioral theories, the findings underscore that value expression, self-improvement, and social interaction are consistently strong predictors of volunteering intention, which in turn mediates actual service behavior (Fernandes & Matos, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). The integration of intention as a psychological bridge offers a nuanced understanding of how internal drives translate into sustained civic participation.

For higher education institutions, these insights suggest the need to embed volunteerism into academic and developmental structures. Universities should promote service-learning programs, offer recognition systems, and cultivate inclusive campus cultures that validate diverse motivational pathways. Volunteer organizations, meanwhile, should tailor engagement strategies to align with students' intrinsic values and career aspirations, while providing emotional and social support to reinforce intention and retention (Wu & Xu, 2022).

Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to explore the dynamic evolution of volunteering intention and behavior. Comparative studies

across cultural and institutional contexts are also needed to refine theoretical models and inform policy development. Additionally, greater attention should be paid to informal volunteering and marginalized student populations to ensure inclusive and equitable participation in civic life.

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