A Comparative Study on College Students' Participation in Volunteer Services in Major World Cities

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From a global perspective, this paper conducts a systematic comparative study on college students' participation in volunteer services across 17 major cities in 12 countries spanning five continents. By constructing a trinity analytical framework of driving forces-policy support-cultural orientation, the study identifies three typical driving modes of college students' volunteer services worldwide: the civil society-institution driven mode, the government-university led mode, and the community-issue driven mode. Based on cross-continental comparisons, this paper puts forward recommendations including building intelligent service platforms and optimizing incentive mechanisms, aiming to facilitate the improvement and innovation of college students' volunteer service systems in China and across the globe.

Keywords: college students' volunteer services, global comparison, driving mode, policy instrument

Introduction

Current research on volunteer services mainly focuses on youth volunteer activities. However, there are relatively few studies specifically targeting college student volunteers, who belong to a special group of young people. Only a few researchers have conducted surveys on the current situation of college student volunteer services in certain regions. The research mainly provides some data analysis and current situation descriptions, lacking substantive countermeasure studies and theoretical summaries with guiding significance. Based on the research results of volunteer services and youth volunteer actions, this article mainly conducts research from the perspective of contemporary college student volunteer services.

In this era where globalization and modernization are intertwined, volunteer services have transcended being merely individual acts of kindness. They have become an important indicator of a country's social civilization level, the modernization degree of its governance capabilities, and the potential for the development of young

people. As the most knowledge-driven, innovative, and socially responsible group, the breadth and depth of college students' participation in volunteer services not only directly affect the appearance of the country's social development, but also showcase the spiritual temperament of a country's youth generation and the growth status of its civil society to the world. When we look globally—from the busy "food bank" volunteers in North American communities, to the multilingual volunteers who handle themselves calmly at international conferences; from the meticulous service network between universities and communities in Asia, to the "micro-philanthropy" practices full of grassroots wisdom on the land of Latin America—these distinctive forms of volunteer services jointly depict a vivid picture of contemporary world youth engaging in public welfare, and also allow us to see the diverse interpretations of the volunteer spirit in the new era.

However, when we attempt to delve deeper into this global picture, we are confronted with a significant deficiency in the field of academic research: Most of the existing achievements are limited to country-specific cases or regional comparisons, lacking a macroscopic perspective that integrates diverse development models across different civilizations. This fragmented research situation makes it difficult for us to grasp the internal logic and future direction of global university student volunteer services, and also to a considerable extent restricts countries like ours, which are in the stage of deepening the volunteer service system, from obtaining systematic inspirations from world experiences.

Precisely because of this, this study attempts to establish a more inclusive global perspective. Through in-depth comparisons of 17 typical cities across 12 countries on five continents (including London, Paris, Madrid, Brussels, Moscow, Tokyo, Seoul, Boston, Toronto, Mexico City, Melbourne, Beijing, etc.), it explores the development patterns of global university student volunteer services. We have constructed an analytical framework of "driving forces—policy support—cultural orientation", striving to achieve the following research goals: firstly, clarify the commonalities and individualities of different development models within each region; secondly, extract the typology of volunteer service development from a global perspective; thirdly, focus on analyzing the "dual attributes" demonstrated by the Beijing case under the positioning of a major country's capital; finally, based on the findings of the comparative study, provide forward-looking policy recommendations for the development of university student volunteer services in China and globally.

The Global Development Pattern and Trends of College Students' Volunteer Services

Globally, the student-led volunteer model has served as a foundational pillar for the advancement of volunteerism across diverse national contexts. Variations in civil society's capacity and willingness to engage in voluntary service—shaped by distinct socio-institutional frameworks and regional development trajectories—have given rise to three predominant models: (1) the institution-driven model, exemplified by Europe and North America, which rests upon robust legal frameworks, well-developed civic infrastructure, and a mature ecosystem of non-state actors; (2) the government-school-led model, prevalent in many Asian countries, characterized by top-down strategic policy guidance, coordinated institutional mobilization, and integration of volunteer education into formal curricula; and (3) the community- and issue-driven model, widely observed in Latin America and Oceania, distinguished by its grassroots orientation, contextual adaptability, and responsiveness to locally identified social needs. Illustrative cases include Egypt's 2021 adoption of the "National Volunteer Guidelines", which institutionalize standardized training, promote volunteer culture through public outreach, and establish a national Volunteer Alliance to consolidate decentralized civic efforts—thereby enhancing alignment between volunteer initiatives and community priorities. Similarly, South Korea's "Volunteer Promotion Act" established

a vertically integrated governance structure—from national ministries to municipal volunteer centers—embedding volunteer service within broader national development goals and enabling efficient cross-sectoral resource coordination.

Contemporary university student volunteerism worldwide is characterized by four interrelated developmental trends. First, digital transformation is advancing rapidly: National volunteer information platforms—such as those implemented in the EU, South Korea, and Canada—are being institutionalized to enable real-time demand-supply matching, data-informed resource allocation, and longitudinal impact tracking. Second, a shift toward skills-based volunteering is underway: Discipline-specific expertise (e.g., public health, education technology, environmental engineering) is increasingly leveraged to address complex societal challenges, moving beyond conventional labor-intensive activities and thereby elevating both service efficacy and volunteer professional development. Third, internationalization is deepening structurally: Flagship initiatives—including the European Union's European Solidarity Corps, which facilitates over 100,000 cross-border placements annually—reflect a growing policy commitment to embedding youth volunteering within frameworks of intercultural dialogue, mutual learning, and global citizenship education. Fourth, strategic alignment with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has become a normative benchmark: National volunteer systems across diverse contexts—from Colombia's "Volunteerism for the SDGs" framework to Japan's "SDG Volunteer Certification Program"—are systematically mapping service domains, indicators, and reporting mechanisms to the 17 SDGs, reinforcing volunteering's role as a catalytic mechanism for inclusive and sustainable social progress. Collectively, these trends offer empirically grounded, context-sensitive insights that inform the evidence-based advancement of university-led volunteer ecosystems in China.

Convergences and Distinctive Features Across Regional Volunteer Service Models

Based on the research of 17 cities across five continents, this chapter will systematically and comparatively analyze the development models of university student volunteer services in each continent by geographical division. By analyzing typical cases from Europe, Asia, North America, Oceania, and Latin America, the aim is to reveal the common features and individual differences among different countries within the same region, laying the foundation for the subsequent extraction of global patterns.

The European system of university student volunteer services demonstrates a profound historical accumulation and a high degree of institutionalization. Its common core lies in the following aspects: The long-standing tradition of a civil society has provided rich social soil for volunteer services; at the EU level and at the national government level, a complete legal and policy support system has been established, providing solid guarantees for the rights and interests of volunteers; volunteer services are generally regarded as an important part of civic education, aiming to cultivate mature citizens with a sense of social responsibility.

The volunteer service model for Asian university students is rooted in a profound traditional cultural heritage and closely integrated with strong government governance during the modernization process. Its common characteristics are manifested as follows: The collectivism, social responsibility, and harmony concepts advocated by the Confucian cultural circle provide an intrinsic cultural driving force for volunteer services; the government plays a core role in the development planning, resource integration, and directional guidance of volunteer services; volunteer services are highly associated with students' academic development and career paths, possessing a certain attribute of "latent competitiveness". Under this framework, the development paths of various countries exhibit different focuses.

The volunteer service ecosystem in North America is characterized by the extreme development and high degree of marketization of the non-profit sector. The common foundation of this ecosystem lies in the fact that a large, mature, and highly specialized non-profit sector constitutes the main carrier of volunteer services; the strong individualism and pragmatism in social culture emphasize the realization of personal growth, skill improvement, and social connection through volunteer services; charitable donations from the government, foundations, and individuals provide sufficient financial support for volunteer services. Under this ecosystem, three countries represent three different driving logics.

Australia has explicitly incorporated volunteer services into its strategic framework for national identity building. University students in Melbourne focus their volunteer efforts highly on two core national issues: environmental justice and reconciliation with indigenous communities. For instance, students at the University of Melbourne actively participate in the "Coastline Restoration Project", while students at RMIT University collaborate with indigenous communities on the "Cultural Map" project. The government sets clear participation rate targets through the "National Volunteer Strategy" and incentivizes through innovative policy tools such as the "Volunteer Bank", aligning volunteer services closely with the country's sustainable development agenda.

Panama represents the emerging force of rapid growth in volunteer services in Latin America. Its model is entirely based on the actual needs of the community as the fundamental starting point, and its growth momentum is very strong (a 13% increase over the past six years). Volunteer services by university students are mainly concentrated in the most urgent areas of people's livelihood, such as environmental protection and support for children and teenagers' education (The survey reveals that volunteer services in Panama have grown—National TV Panamá). Social organizations (such as the Panamanian Hummingbird Foundation) are extremely active and are the main force in initiating and operating volunteer projects. The case of the Panamanian University shows that students strengthen their sense of social responsibility by participating in specific and visible community services (such as environmental maintenance at the Special Education Institute), and volunteer services present distinct practical and endogenous characteristics[1].

By examining the five continents, we can clearly observe that global university student volunteerism does not follow a uniform development path; instead, it is deeply rooted in each region's social system, cultural traditions, and development stage. In Europe, there is "institutional guarantee"; in Asia, it is "government-school-led"; in North America, it is "market-society-driven"; and in Oceania and Latin America, it is "issue-community-based". Together, these various approaches form a rich and diverse global picture. This diversity not only enriches our understanding but also provides a solid analytical foundation for subsequent cross-continental comparisons and model refinement.

The Refinement, Challenges, and Trends of the Global Model

Based on the analysis of the core driving forces of cases in various continents, three dominant global models can be identified. These models not only reflect different governance structures but also demonstrate the varying expectations of each country regarding the participation of young people in social development.

Civil Society—Driven by Institutions

This model is typically exemplified by Europe and North America. Its successful operation is based on two

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[1] Estudiantes de la Universidad de Panamá realizan jornada de voluntariado en la EVE del IPHE; Estudiantes de la Universidad de Panamá realizan jornada de voluntariado en la EVE del IPHE.

fundamental pillars: a mature civil society sector and a well-developed legal guarantee system. In these regions, non-profit organizations, charitable institutions, and other third-party organizations constitute the main platform for volunteer services. Taking London as an example, its charitable sector raises over 10 billion pounds annually, supporting a volunteer service network covering various fields such as education, healthcare, and environmental protection. It is worth noting that the precise positioning of the government's role in this model is not direct intervention but creating an environment. For instance, France's "Volunteer Service Law" not only clarifies the rights and obligations of volunteers but also innovatively establishes the "Citizen Service" system, providing young people with 6-12 months of full-time service opportunities and offering subsidies. This system design not only ensures the sustainability of participation but also avoids excessive administrativeization.

Government-School-Led Model

This model is widely adopted by Asian countries, and its most notable feature is the integration of volunteer services into the national development strategy framework. The practice in South Korea is particularly exemplary: Through the "Volunteer Promotion Act", the volunteer service system was institutionalized, a vertical management system from the central government to local governments was established, and volunteer services were deeply integrated with school education. Data from Seoul University shows that after the policy of including volunteer service in graduation requirements was implemented at the university, the participation rate of students increased from 45% to 62.3%. The powerful mobilization ability of this model was fully demonstrated at the Beijing Winter Olympics—the precise allocation, professional training, and organizational management of 14,000 university volunteers created one of the largest volunteer actions in Olympic history. However, this model also faces the ongoing challenge of how to balance administrative guidance with individual will.

Community-Issue-Driven

In Latin America and Oceania, volunteer services have shown a stronger local characteristic. The "contextualized charity" practice at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua in Mexico is quite representative: Students, based on local cultural characteristics, designed innovative forms such as "piggy bank for fundraising on campus" and "street car fundraising", integrating volunteer services naturally into daily life scenarios. Australia has demonstrated another issue-oriented approach—students at the University of Melbourne's volunteer services closely revolve around the country's two core issues: environmental justice (such as the coastal restoration plan) and reconciliation with indigenous people (such as the cultural map project). The charm of this model lies in its strong internal driving force, but it also faces challenges such as limited resources and insufficient sustainability.

It should be emphasized that these three ideal types often intermingle in reality. The practice in Canada showcases an interesting mixed feature: While providing universal support at the federal level, it also fully leverages the autonomy of multicultural communities, forming a unique pattern of "the government provides the platform, and society performs the show".

As countries develop university student volunteer services, they have formed a diverse set of policy tools. The combined use of these tools profoundly influences the scale and quality of volunteer services.

The spectrum of legal frameworks varies from the "rights protection type" in Europe to the "active promotion type" in Asia, presenting a clear gradient. Belgium's "Volunteer Law" is more like a "volunteer rights charter", detailing specific rights such as accident insurance and expense reimbursement, while the relevant laws in South Korea are more like a "national mobilization guide", clearly stipulating the responsibilities and obligations of various levels of government and schools.

The design of the incentive system particularly tests policy wisdom. Our research has found that the effect of simple material incentives is often unsatisfactory. A survey at a certain university in Beijing showed that when volunteer services were directly linked to scholarships, although the short-term participation rate increased, the quality and sustainability of the services actually declined. In contrast, the "Volunteer Capacity Certification System" established by Seoul University is more worthy of reference—by meticulously recording the professional skills, leadership, and other soft skills that students acquire in volunteer services, and linking them to job recommendations, it forms a more sustainable incentive cycle.

The paths of platform construction also vary. Digital platforms are reshaping the ecosystem of volunteer services: The "JeVeuxAider.gouv.fr" platform led by the French government has achieved nationwide demand matching; Seoul University's "Volunteer Hub" focuses on the refined operation of school-local cooperation, while the "VolunteerMatch" in the United States demonstrates the innovative vitality of social forces. These platforms are evolving from simple information intermediaries to comprehensive service centers that integrate training, certification, and communication.

Common Challenges and Future Development Trends

Although the development paths vary, global university student volunteer services are facing some similar challenges and also showing a clear evolutionary trend.

Common Challenges

First, the participation dilemma is widespread. Data from Brussels shows that although the participation rate of international students in volunteer services is as high as 52.7%, the average service time is only 60% of that of local students. The survey in Beijing reveals a deeper contradiction: 94% of the students recognize the value of volunteer services, but only 35% can consistently participate.

Second, the trend of utilitarianism has become a global problem. A survey by Seoul University found that 28% of students explicitly admitted that they participated in volunteer services to enhance their employment competitiveness. This erosion of instrumental rationality on the part of value rationality is changing the essence of volunteer services.

Third, uneven resource distribution is manifested in different forms in various countries. In North America, it is the resource gap between communities; in Asia, it is the uneven allocation among universities; in Latin America, it is the huge gap between urban and rural areas.

Fourth, insufficient professional management hinders service quality. From community organizations in Panama to volunteer centers in Moscow, the lack of professional management talents has become a common development bottleneck.

Future Trends

First, digital transformation is accelerating. The VolunTech platform developed by Stanford University uses AI algorithms to achieve precise matching between volunteers and projects, increasing the matching efficiency by 40%. The "digital twin" technology has begun to be applied in volunteer training, and the drills conducted in virtual scenarios have significantly improved service quality.

Second, professional skills-based volunteer services are on the rise. Traditional physical services are being replaced by professional skills-based services. Projects such as the "Enterprise Consulting Volunteers" program at New York University and the "Engineering Technology Volunteers" team at Berlin University of Technology

indicate that volunteer services are shifting towards knowledge-intensive forms.

Third, the internationalization process is deepening. The EU's "European Solidarity Corps" project supports tens of thousands of young people in cross-border service each year, and this experience is becoming an important part of European youth identity. University alliances in the Asia-Pacific region are also establishing similar cross-border volunteer service mechanisms.

Fourth, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals has become a new consensus. Volunteer systems in various countries are systematically aligning with the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. University volunteer services have evolved from scattered actions to a global movement with clear agendas.

Summary

This study conducted a systematic comparison and in-depth case analysis of 16 cities in 12 countries across five continents, clearly revealing the diversity and unity of global university student volunteerism development. The research results indicate that there are three main typical driving models globally: the "civil society—institutional-driven type" (represented by Europe and America), the "government—school-led type" (represented by Asia), and the "community—issue-driven type" (applicable in Latin America, Oceania, and some community practices). These three models are rooted in their respective unique social structures, cultural traditions, and governance logics, and there is no absolute superiority or inferiority. Their effectiveness highly depends on the specific environment they are in.

Although this study strives for comprehensiveness, it is limited by data availability and research scope, and there is still room for further expansion. Future research can continue in the following directions:

Firstly, long-term tracking of impact assessment: In the future, a follow-up study design can be adopted to conduct long-term follow-up on university students involved in volunteer activities, precisely evaluating the long-term causal effects of volunteerism on their career development, civic attitudes, and life trajectories.

Secondly, effectiveness research on digital transformation: With the in-depth application of AI and big data technologies in the field of volunteerism, the impact on participation efficiency, fairness, and volunteer interpersonal relationships urgently needs in-depth research.

Finally, South-South comparison and "Belt and Road Initiative" research: This study's coverage of global southern countries is relatively limited. In the future, it can focus on countries along the "Belt and Road Initiative" to conduct more targeted South-South comparative research and explore new models for cross-cultural background volunteer cooperation.

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