Voluntary Civic Engagement at a University in Egypt: Entry pathways and sense of community

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Abstract
This study explored the factors that can lead a person to become civically engaged. We conducted focus groups with the five large community service clubs at a university in Egypt, which showed that there are four major pathways to civic engagement: 1) social networks; 2) club recruitment; 3) internal motivation; and 4) external factors. Our data suggest that social relationships with family and friends are the most significant factors in determining whether a person will become civically engaged. Moreover, in contrast to studies conducted in the West, our findings indicate that club recruitment is another major factor.

Introduction
Most studies related to student volunteerism focus on the effects of such civic engagement on personal and social wellbeing, whereas fewer studies examine the factors that lead students to participate in civic engagement. From among these, Hellman, Hoppes, and Ellison (2006) found that students’ sense of responsibility and commitment to serving their community was highly associated with their intention to volunteer, as was the students’ assessment of the costs and benefits of joining. On the other hand, awareness of community needs and sense of moral obligation did not predict the intention to volunteer. While previous literature provides insights into the motivating factors leading to student-initiated civic engagement and volunteerism, these studies have almost exclusively been carried out in a Western context. This study not only explores the determinant factors that lead college students in Egypt to become civically engaged, but also examines the sense of community that is generated as an outcome of joining.

Methods
This study took place at a private liberal arts university in Egypt. Focus groups were conducted with five large community service clubs. These clubs are entirely student-initiated and mostly voluntary, and focus their activities on serving marginalized communities such as refugees and informal districts. Approximately 4-6 club leaders and members, both males and females, participated in each focus group. The sessions were facilitated by student members of the research team. The focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data and develop a model for the entry pathways towards civic engagement.

Results
Our findings indicated four major pathways to civic engagement: 1) encouragement from social network (e.g., friends and family); 2) active recruitment from on-campus community service clubs (e.g., on-campus advertisement via booths and distribution of fliers etc.); 3) intrinsic factors such as a desire to gain new experiences or build upon previous commitment to community service; and 4) extrinsic factors such wanting to maintain financial scholarships and develop résumés.

A theme that emerged from the focus groups was the excitement and collective spirit of commitment and dedication that is produced post joining the community service clubs. The study shows how an atmosphere of unity and collective purpose drives and keeps civic engagers motivated and excited about their work. Students reported a strong sense of community and pride that is gained from being able to establish a solid reputation among other community service clubs.

Discussion
Our data indicated that social relationships such as encouragement from older siblings and parents played the most significant role in influencing students to join a particular club, particularly when the family member or friend was previously or currently a member of that club. This is consistent with the collectivistic culture and roles that family and social networks play in daily choices among university students in Egypt. Religiosity did not emerge as a significant motivator despite its salience in the previous literature and importance to the local culture. Similarly, despite these students’ recognition of their socioeconomic privileges, a sense of commitment to serving less privileged communities was not emphasized as a motivating factor to join the clubs (although continued commitment to the club work was inspired by such civic consciousness).

For many club members, the club’s intentional recruitment strategies did have an impact on attracting the students to join. Unlike previous studies in Western contexts that stress the students’ cost-benefit analysis before volunteering, students in this study indicated that they simply “signed up” in response to the encouragement of the club recruiter without considering what the ramifications would be after they joined. Once again, these results show how important interpersonal influences are to the students’ decision to volunteer. On the other hand, although it was one of the pathways for volunteerism, instrumental gains such as adding activities to a résumé were not as common.

Although there were different pathways to enter community service clubs, after joining all the students were reportedly moved by a culture of spirit, excitement, and pride. This indicates that the initial motivators for engaging in civic engagement may not determine later commitment and motivation to continue.

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