

# Effect of college on volunteering greatest among disadvantaged college graduates

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Sociologists have long known that a college education improves the chances that an individual will volunteer as an adult. Less clear is whether everyone who goes to college gets the same boost in civic engagement from the experience.

In an innovative study that compared the volunteering rates of [college graduates](#) with those of non-college graduates with similar social backgrounds and high school achievement levels, UCLA sociologist Jennie Brand found something striking: A college education has a much greater impact on volunteering rates among individuals from underprivileged backgrounds than among those from more fortunate circumstances.

It's not that one set of graduates volunteers more frequently than another, said Brand, an associate professor of sociology. In fact, when it comes to engagement with civic, community and youth groups, graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more advantaged circumstances [volunteer](#) the same amount in adulthood.

However, a significant difference was seen when Brand compared college graduates with non-college graduates from the same background. Disadvantaged graduates were found to be up to 10 times more likely to volunteer for these types of groups than their non-college-educated counterparts, while more advantaged graduates were only twice as likely to volunteer as their less-educated peers. For disadvantaged students, therefore, the boost in volunteering rates as a result of the college

experience was five times greater than for advantaged graduates.

The study findings appear in the current issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Social Forces*.

"I expected to find that the effect of college on volunteering rates would differ based on individuals' likelihood of completing college, but I was surprised by how large the difference was," said Brand, who specializes in the sociology of education and civic engagement.

Brand based her research on a survey of 12,686 American individuals who were 14 to 17 years old when they were first interviewed in 1979 and who were followed through 2008. When first approached in 1979, the participants were asked about their family's socioeconomic, racial and educational backgrounds, as well as their own college aspirations and those of their close friends. They also completed a standard cognitive ability test in 1980. The survey then asked about the volunteerism rates of these individuals in 2006, when respondents were in their early 40s.

Brand focused on two distinct volunteer activities: (1) civic, community and youth groups, such as the League of Women Voters and Little League, and (2) charitable organizations and social welfare groups, such as the Salvation Army and soup kitchens for the homeless. By comparing college graduates with peers from the same background and ability who did not attend college, she could better approximate the impact of the college experience on volunteer rates, she said.

Differences in the volunteering rates among these groups, she reasons, can be attributed to the "college effect" — the experience of going to college, an expanded social network of educated peers, and exposure to civic norms and responsibilities.

In both categories of volunteerism, all college graduates were, on

average, twice as likely as non-college graduates to participate. But for college graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds who had a low likelihood of completing college (by virtue of such factors as their socioeconomic background and lower ability), the lift was dramatically higher.

In addition to being 10 times more likely to volunteer for civic, community and youth groups, college graduates with a low likelihood of college completion proved to be four times more likely to volunteer for charitable organizations and social welfare groups than non-college graduates from similar communities and backgrounds. There was no difference in volunteerism rates in this area between graduates with a high likelihood of college completion and their non-college-educated counterparts.

"While volunteering rates among advantaged and disadvantaged graduates are similar, volunteering rates among non-college graduates drop the more disadvantaged their background," Brand explained. "This produces larger relative gains among the disadvantaged college-goers."

When it comes to civic, community and youth groups, just 1.5 percent of disadvantaged non-college graduates volunteer, compared with about 7.5 percent for more advantaged non-college graduates, Brand noted. By contrast, 15 percent of college graduates volunteer, irrespective of social background.

"Whether it's because of labor market challenges, low income and job insecurity, less education, the pressures of single parenthood, or health problems, volunteer rates overall are lower among disadvantaged individuals relative to those from more privileged communities," she said. "And this means that children from these communities are less likely to have parents who taught them the norms of traditional civic engagement."

In addition to making volunteer rates among college graduates appear relatively high, low volunteer rates in struggling communities tend to put extra pressure on college graduates.

"People who are more educated are more likely to be asked to use their time for their communities," Brand said. "That pressure drives up the volunteer rates of people from less privileged backgrounds: there are fewer people to carry the load."

Brand believes her findings provide a solid scientific basis for civic engagement activities at universities, especially those like UCLA, which has a large number of first-generation college-goers.

"College fosters knowledge of civic norms and responsibilities, and it encourages students to develop a social network of civically active peers," Brand said. "This research shows that the effort pays off."

Provided by University of California Los Angeles

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