

# On the Influence of Voluntary Service Activities on Improving College Students' Practical Ability

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**Abstract.** College students' voluntary service, serving as an important form of education through practice, provides an effective platform to improve their practical ability. The social capital theory can offer a reliable illustration for the above-mentioned functional mechanism. At the matter, however, there remain some problems including less overall efficiency and insufficient enhancement of professional practical ability. In order to improve the situation we need to reinforce the building of volunteer teams, strengthen the guidance of organizing voluntary service, and enhance the support system of voluntary service.

**Key Words.** college students; voluntary service; practical ability

Improving college students' practical ability is an important task for higher education in the new period. As a form for college students to participate in social production activities, not only does the voluntary service benefit the society, but also nurtures their civic awareness and the sense of responsibility, and promote their overall development so as to help others and themselves. The paper is based on the elements of practical ability from the perspective of the social capital theory. By means of empirical study it discusses the current situation, functional mechanism and optimized method of enhancing college students' practical ability by voluntary service activities.

## 1 Elements of college students' practical ability

The basic human practice activities are classified into three categories, namely the production practice, social practice and scientific experiment. The practical ability refers to the individuals' ability in participating in the three kinds of practice and then solving the practical problems with their own knowledge and skills. The college students' practical ability, at both the basic and professional levels, refers to their ability in conducting the mentioned practice purposely and designedly with subjective initiative based on their specialties.

The basic practice ability refers to the general ones needed for conducting practice activities, such as the abilities in social cognition, organization and coordination, self-expression, interpersonal communication, environmental adaption and team cooperation. The professional practical ability refers to the ones needed by college students who are regarded as advanced professionals when they carry out the professional practical activities. It includes engineering students' drawing ability, science students' experiment skills, normal school students' teaching ability and others. It is made up of the abilities of professional operation, application, innovation and others. The basic and professional practical ability are the subsystems based on

interconnection and mutual development. The former serves as the fundamentals which mainly deal with social adaptation while the latter is the core which mainly deals with the professional adaptation. Different combinations of the two represent the practical abilities in different structures and at different levels.

The practical ability is developed in a dynamic evolution process which includes the transformation, internalization and shift from knowledge into skills. The evolution has to be finished in practice activities. As a form of college students' participation in social production practice, the voluntary service can lay a practical foundation for developing their practical ability.

## **2 The research on the current situation of the influence of voluntary service on improving college students' practical ability**

In order to have a clear understanding of its current situation, the author carried out a questionnaire survey of 358 college student volunteers and 173 non-volunteers sampled from three universities in Wuhan. The research also covered individual interviews with a part of college student volunteers. The study found that the voluntary service has a positive impact on improving college students' practical ability as it is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, college students who often participate in volunteer activities have remarkably higher scores of self-assessment of practical abilities than that of those students who don't participate in. The questionnaire is composed of nine dimensions, namely the abilities in social cognition, organization and coordination, self-expression, interpersonal communication, environmental adaptation, team cooperation, professional operation, professional application and professional innovation. College students who often participate in volunteer activities and who don't were asked to grade these practical abilities according to the five-grade marking system. The statistics shows a relatively significant difference: the former has average points of 3.7 while the latter has 2.8. The two groups' average points of the first six dimensions are respectively 3.9 and 2.7, which reveals a more significant difference.

Secondly, college students generally believe that participation in volunteer service activities is beneficial to improving basic practical abilities. Those who have participated in volunteer activities think that the top five practical abilities which could be enhanced in the process are the abilities in interpersonal communication, environmental adaptation, team cooperation, organization and coordination, and self-expression. They are respectively believed to get improved due to volunteer activities by 92.2, 90.7, 89.3, 82.7, 80.7 percent of college student volunteers. Meanwhile, 71.5 percent of college student volunteers hold that participation in volunteer activities promotes their ability in social cognition. Respectively 70.5, 74.5, 82.6, 78.0, 78.6, 75.1 percent of college students who haven't participated in volunteer activities think that the six basic practical abilities of their classmates have got improved due to volunteer service activities. It shows that even those college students who haven't participated in volunteer activities think highly of the positive effects of voluntary service on improving their basic practical abilities.

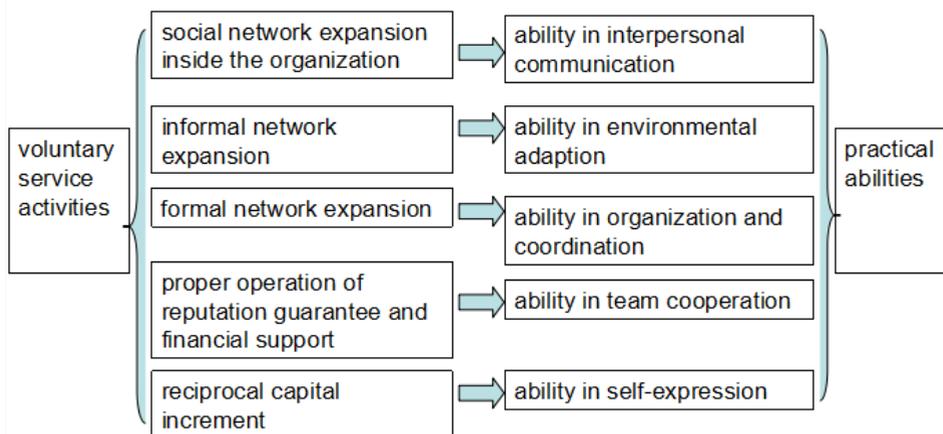
Thirdly, the majority of college students agree that participation in volunteer activities is beneficial to improving their professional practical abilities, but quite a few students don't think so. Participation in volunteer service activities is believed to be conducive to improving the abilities in professional operation, professional application and professional innovation respectively by 52.7, 54.5, 50.3 percent of college student volunteers. These percentages are significantly lower than those of college student volunteers who approve the positive effects of voluntary service activities on improving the basic practical abilities. Respectively only 59.5, 57.8, 56.6 percent of college students who haven't participated in volunteer service activities think that the three professional practical abilities of their classmates have got improved due to frequent volunteer service activities. It shows that college students think that volunteer service activities have less positive impacts on improving professional practical abilities than basic practical abilities. The statistics can be supported by the fact that currently college students mainly undertake general and non-

professional volunteer service activities, and less professional practices such as providing support of science and technology, and dissemination of science.

### 3 The mechanism of the impacts of voluntary service on improving college students' practical abilities

Gradually formed during the 1990s, the social capital theory is a theoretic model aimed to explain paths of economic growth and social development. According to the theory, the social capital is regarded as the state and features of the close connection between social subjects (including the individual, group, society and even country). Compared with economic and human capital, the social capital can bring future profits to individuals when considered as the relationship between individuals and organization or others. Its forms of manifestation include social networks, norms, trust, reciprocity, shared expectations and social morals. Norman Uphoff, an American social scientist, proposed the concepts of structural and cognitive forms of social capital. The structural social capital which includes the relationships, networks and associations of social subjects contributes to mutual communication and discussion on overall path and formation of common rules. The cognitive social capital which includes shared norms, expectations, trust and social morals contributes to each other's choices of mutually beneficial collective actions (MBCA) and reciprocity. In addition, based on the features of network members and the degree of network openness, the structural forms of social capital can also be divided into internalized and externalized network categories. Composed of homogeneous network members, the internalized network is relatively close with strong relationship between them who can gain emotional and resource support from the network so as to further strengthen their reciprocal capital and reputation guarantee. The externalized network is made up of heterogeneous members with relatively open network and weak membership. It can expand members' informal network and the scope of gaining resources, and provide them with additional resource increments.

The social capital theory can offer a reliable explanation for the mechanism of the impacts of voluntary service on improving college students' practical abilities. By means of the theory the research found that college students can increase their own social capital stock through voluntary service activities so that they can further improve practical abilities. The function forms include at least the following types as it is shown in the chart.



Firstly, the social network expansion inside the organization is helpful for college students participating in voluntary service activities to improve their ability in interpersonal communication. Currently the college voluntary service groups are organized in the form of students' society, association and service team. Their staff composition is different from that of the class, dormitory and other common social networks in which college students live. Therefore they can provide new

social networks for college student volunteers, help them expand the scope of interpersonal communication, and hence enhance their ability in interpersonal communication.

Secondly, the informal network expansion is helpful for college students participating in voluntary service activities to improve their abilities in social cognition and environmental adaption. Since the voluntary service activities offer public benefit service to the society and others, the volunteers have to exchange information and other elements with those non-specific objects that don't have interest relationship with them. As a result, the participation in voluntary service activities can help college students understand and adapt to the unfamiliar environments and groups, shape themselves with initiative in the process so as to promote their own abilities in social cognition and environmental adaption.

Thirdly, the formal network expansion is helpful for college students participating in voluntary service activities to improve their ability in organization and coordination. Having joined in a voluntary service group, the college students will become a member of the internalized network with close membership and common targets. Consequently they have to undertake some responsibilities of organization and coordination and have strong relationship with other members so that a platform of practice is provided for them to enhance the ability in organization and coordination.

Fourthly, those college students who have participated in voluntary service activities are more familiar with the operation of reputation guarantee and other social rules, which is beneficial to improving their ability in team cooperation. When conducting the voluntary activities the student volunteers may seek the society for fund and material support with their volunteer identity guarantee, and then donate them to others. During the intermediary activity, choosing cooperation partner, valuing self-reputation, observing cooperation rules and other actions are conducive to improving college students' ability in team cooperation.

Fifthly, the reciprocal capital increment is helpful for college students participating in voluntary service activities to improve their ability in self-expression. No matter it is from the internal voluntary service group or the external social environment, the extra reciprocal capital increment which the college students gain through the participation in voluntary service activities leads to a higher recognition degree from the society, college and others. The increment helps student volunteers be more confident to show themselves and hence improve the ability in self-expression.

Besides, the professional skills grasped by college students which can be regarded as human capital stock, and the social capital increment brought by the voluntary service activities are conducive to releasing college students' human capital stock, improving their professional practice abilities, and therefore illustrating the mechanism of the impacts of voluntary service on improving college students' practical abilities.

#### **4 Optimized path for voluntary service platform improving college students' practical ability**

According to the above analysis, the voluntary service activities can effectively improve college students' practical ability but practically there remain some problems like less overall efficiency and insufficient enhancement of professional practical ability. The author thinks that the following measures should be adopted to strengthen and improve the college students' voluntary service so as to optimize the voluntary service platform which contributes to improving college students' practical ability.

Firstly, we need to strengthen the building of the voluntary teams which should be transformed from elite-type to mass-type. Currently the college voluntary teams remain minorities with limited participation and coverage. The scope of college student volunteers benefiting from the practice should be enlarged. When carrying out the projects aimed to cultivate students by practice, universities and colleges have to focus on creating favorable atmosphere for voluntary service activities, establish and perfect the mechanism of mobilizing student volunteers. They should encourage more students to participate actively in voluntary service by incorporating the practice

into personnel training program and comprehensive quality appraisal system for students. Also the universities and colleges should build the teacher teams better for guiding the voluntary service activities, ensure that designated person is responsible for student voluntary service, encourage specialized teachers' instruction so as to raise teachers' professional level in guiding students' voluntary activities. Besides, they should select and award excellent volunteers more and cite those college ones regularly.

Secondly, we need to strengthen the guidance for voluntary service organizations which should be transformed from quantitative-type to qualitative-type. Currently there generally exist limited activity forms, extensive organization and management, weak thoroughness, poor continuity and other problems in college students' voluntary activities, which has greatly confined the efficiency of cultivating students by voluntary activities. In order to implement qualitative voluntary service activities, first of all, we should enrich their forms, lead and support students to conduct those activities in more accordance with the social demand and their own specialties. Professional voluntary service activities such as providing support of science and technology, dissemination of science and technological service are especially encouraged so as to raise their level and quality. We should also build better the voluntary teams, strengthen their management and guidance from the following aspects: selection and distribution of key members, review and approval of activities, and fund oversight and supervision. We should attach importance to civic voluntary organizations set up by students, support and build excellent influential voluntary teams in the field of activity design and fund support. In addition, we should standardize the operation model of voluntary service activities in these respects: subject selection, activity organization and fund utilization. And we can establish the organization model for voluntary service activities in which there successively is the design, scheme and conclusion before, during and after the activity. Finally we need to enhance the brand awareness in the voluntary service activities. The voluntary teams should be encouraged to keep conducting the single activity in a certain period so that a voluntary service reputation could be formed with long-term accumulation.

Thirdly, we need to strengthen the support system for voluntary service activities which should be transformed from spontaneity-type to linkage-type. On the one hand, the foundation for carrying out voluntary service activities is the student volunteers' spontaneous voluntary service. On the other hand, the key of promoting its efficiency is the three-parties joint participation, i.e. the college, society and student volunteers, as well as voluntary service linkage system integrating personnel, platform, fund and institutional supports. In addition to strengthening the building of voluntary teams, we should also reinforce the voluntary service platform by launching a number of voluntary service bases and special projects. We should enhance the financial support for voluntary service. For instance, relevant functional departments of universities should allocate annually specialized fund to voluntary service activities and provide active assistance for student volunteers to seek for social fund. We should establish and perfect voluntary service work systems including volunteer registration, assessment and incentive, appraisal and election of excellent volunteers, and volunteer organization constitution. Thus the institutional guarantee can be provided for conducting voluntary service activities.

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