

College Students' Perceptions on Effects of Volunteering With Adults With Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to address the research question, "Does direct contact with individuals with developmental disabilities positively alter college student attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities?" Subjects were undergraduate students from various majors who participated in an alternative spring break trip working with adults with disabilities. A mixed-methods study was used. Two instruments were administered before and after the volunteer experience: (a) Demographic and Open-Ended Questionnaire and (b) Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (MAS). During the week, research participants kept daily journals where they reflected on their experiences as camp counselors and activity facilitators. Results were consistent with previous research that found significant changes in students' self-perceptions, perception of others, and increased appreciation for social issues (*Mann & DeAngelo, 2016*). Further, results led to the identification of three distinct themes: transformation, enlightenment, and adjourning.

Keywords: volunteering, alternative spring break, disability

Introduction

Study participants were millennials (those born 1982–2004; *Horovitz, 2012*) and enrolled as college students at the time of the study. Much research has been conducted on millennials and their habits, from how they negotiate the work/life balance (*Johnson, 2015*) to their use of mobile devices (*Dlodlo & Mahlangu, 2013*); from their online shopping habits (*Eastman, Iyer, & Thomas, 2013*) to how to teach them (*Werth & Werth, 2011*). The intent of this article is to focus on college students and the effects of volunteering with adults with developmental disabilities. Volunteerism is an extensively studied phenomenon within the millennial generation; however, a specific focus on millennial college students and effects of volunteering with adults with developmental disabilities is lacking in the research.

Millennials and Volunteerism

Findings suggest that millennials are confident they can make a contribution to society (*Howe & Strauss, 2007*) and that they are concerned with helping others who might be in need (*South, 2010*). Millennials' concern about the common good and desire to make a difference in the world around them has led to a connection to and focus on the idea of volunteerism. Whether through financial donations or giving their time to further a particular cause, millennials are a generation naturally in tune with the importance of volunteering (*Baranyi, 2011*). Although many altruistic reasons account for millennials' interest in volunteerism, and millennials are more likely to engage in volunteerism than nonmillennials, *McGlone, Spain, and McGlone (2011)* suggest that millennials also engage in volunteerism for several extrinsic reasons: (a) pressure from social organizations, (b) seeking extra credit for courses, (c) wanting to pad résumés, and (d) family influences. *Bromnick, Horowitz, and Shepherd (2012)* divided the benefits of volunteering into two categories: (a) self focused (e.g., personal rewards, employability, skills, and personal growth) and (b) other focused (e.g., belonging, helping, generativity, and valued).

Regardless of their rationale or motivation for engaging in volunteerism, because they were born during this time in history, millennials do not need to be taught the benefits of volunteering, nor do they need to be "sold" on the importance of reaching out to assist with a cause. They already recognize that volunteering can lead to positive feelings about self and better appreciation for the issues they are volunteering to support (*Conner, 2004*). Millennials realize that as a result of their volunteering they will experience increased social interaction, skill enhancement, and personal enrichment (*Surujal & Dhurup, 2008*), along with feeling generally better about themselves and an increased ability to cope with the problems facing their culture and society (*Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Erickson, 2011*). Research also suggests that participation in volunteer experiences such as alternative spring break trips positively impacts students by increasing personal growth and personal effectiveness (*Beatty, Meadows, SwamiNathan, & Mulvihill, 2016*). Such experiences have led to positive changes in perception of self, perception of others, and perception of social issues (*Mann & DeAngelo, 2016*). This deep-seated attention to the concept of volunteerism and its benefits has the potential to be shaped into service toward a variety of causes.

Disability and Volunteerism

In light of this seemingly innate, positive connection with volunteerism, one must wonder if there is any need to attempt to understand the experiences of millennials who volunteer. Burns (2010) suggested that

nonprofit organizations may be able to target potential volunteers by examining the specific benefits they perceive they received from participating in service learning and focusing on recruiting the potential volunteers whose [perceived] benefits . . . most closely correspond to the motivations to volunteer that their opportunities meet. (p. 93)

In short, we do need to understand what motivates millennials to volunteer and pair them with volunteer experiences that match their desires. One area offering potential for soliciting millennial volunteers who are motivated is working with people with disabilities. Individuals who are in need of additional supports for their participation in events (for the purposes of this study, individuals with disabilities) remain a constant area of need for volunteers.

Although certain populations and events typically have no difficulty garnering volunteers (e.g., events for individuals with developmental disabilities such as the Special Olympics), volunteer solicitation may be particularly challenging for many disability groupings and events. Individuals with disabilities are often isolated and segregated because of their perceived “differentness.” Recognition of this problem is reflected in the existence of specific legislation that has been enacted in the United States to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities (e.g., *Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990*; *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004*; *Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 1973*).

Even while millennials may naturally be drawn toward volunteering, volunteering with individuals with disabilities may prove “scary” and overwhelming. Dattilo (2017) suggested that for people to become comfortable working and interacting with individuals with disabilities, it is recommended that they (a) attend presentations and discussions, (b) develop awareness of personal attitudes, (c) participate in simulations, and (d) make direct contact with individuals with disabilities.

Contact Theory

In light of Dattilo's (2017) suggestions, contact theory (Allport, 1954) appeared to be an effective lens through which to conduct this project. Contact theory suggests that changes in attitude will depend on the conditions under which the contact occurs. For example, unfavorable attitudes are more likely to develop when there is competition, an unpleasant environment, frustration, and objectionable standards. On the other hand, favorable attitudes are more likely to develop when there is equal status in a rewarding experience, personal contact exists over time, and there are common goals present. Contact theory has been used to attempt to predict the efficacy of service-learning projects. Conner and Erickson (2017) found that courses utilizing more principles of contact theory were more effective at addressing participant perceptions of an experience than were courses utilizing fewer principles of contact theory. Shannon, Schoen, and Tansey (2009) identified proximity (interaction) as a major factor in determining and changing attitudes toward people with disabilities. Similarly, Tervo, Palmer, and Redinius (2004), in their work with over 300 students, found that participants' attitudes were more likely to be positive if they had had previous interaction with people with disabilities. These authors also found that increased experiences with individuals with disabilities led to increases in positive attitudes. In continued support of proximity and interaction positively influencing attitudes toward people with disabilities, Rillotta and Nettelbeck (2007) found that a program designed to increase awareness of disability was also effective at creating favorable attitudes toward people with disabilities. In less recent research, Lyons (1990) examined undergraduate students in an occupational therapy program to assess their attitudes toward people with disabilities. Although the attitudes of occupational therapy students did not differ from the attitudes of undergraduate business majors, Lyons (1990) found that students who had experiences emphasizing the value of individuals with disabilities experienced "significantly more positive attitudes than did those students whose contact had been, for example, only in a service role (e.g., patient) or who reported that they had had no contact with persons with disabilities" (p. 315).

It is through these perspectives of college students, volunteerism, working with individuals with disabilities, and contact theory that the research question for this study developed: Does direct contact with individuals with developmental disabilities positively alter college student attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities?

Participants

For the second year in a row, the authors led students on an alternative spring break trip where the students were counselors and activity facilitators for Camp Blue Skies, a program whose mission is to enhance “the lives of adults with intellectual disabilities through recreation, socialization, and education.” Also involved is a second partner, Camp Twin Lakes, the physical camp location where the project occurred. The mission of Camp Twin Lakes is to “provide places and paths for children with serious illnesses and life challenges to experience the joys of childhood and grow in their confidence and capabilities.”

Subjects were undergraduate students at a regional university in the Southeast who applied for and were selected to participate in an alternative spring break trip. Applications were reviewed by the director of the university honors program and the two authors, whose disciplines are recreational therapy and child and family development/child life. The alternative spring break trip is open to any university honors student and students in the two majors in the coauthors' disciplines. If selected for the trip (which accommodates a maximum of 20), students pay a fee of \$175, which covers room and board during the overnight training and the actual week-long camp. All students agreed to attend two precamp meetings on campus, an overnight training session at the camp approximately one month before the camp, the week-long actual camp, and three postcamp meetings. The two precamp, on-campus meetings focused on engaging in group development activities; learning about the physical location of the camp, the camp mission and vision, and the campers who would be in attendance; and addressing any questions or concerns presented by students. The overnight training session continued to provide group development activities along with more education regarding learned helplessness, how to use camp activities intentionally, recreational therapy, camper disability types, and student perspectives regarding the upcoming experience. Students also received training on arrival at the camp (one day prior to camper arrival), where they were provided with a “need-to-know” about each camper from the health services director. As camp progressed, students also participated in daily debriefing sessions where they focused on current challenges as well as successes and were given the opportunity to problem-solve any day-to-day issues that arose. Postcamp meetings were facilitated conversations where students were provided with a structured opportunity to place their experience and lessons learned in the context of their lives and future. These meetings were

designed to debrief, discuss, and process the experience of camp, as well as to acknowledge the “reentry” to their normal lives following an impactful experience.

Students who are selected for the trip volunteer to serve as camp counselors and lead activities, facilitate experiences, and engage in meaningful interactions with the adult campers with developmental disabilities. Campers ranged in age from 20 to 54 years, and typical camper disabilities included autism, Down syndrome, Williams syndrome, seizures/epilepsy, mild to moderate mental retardation, fetal alcohol syndrome, CHARGE syndrome, sensory integration disorder, and congenital myotonic dystrophy.

Approximately half of the students live in the cabins with the campers, and the other students live in a staff cabin but are assigned to interact with a specified cabin group at meals and during all activities. Participants in this study included two males and 17 females. Regarding year in school, there were four freshmen, nine sophomores, five juniors, and one senior. Majors represented were child and family development (6), psychology (4), exercise science (4), recreational therapy (2), biology (2), and journalism (1). The majority of the students had no prior experience working with adults with developmental disabilities. It was this combination of activities and direct contact that the authors were seeking to examine in light of volunteerism and community engagement. Another unique aspect of this study is the collaboration between the university honors program, two faculty members from separate yet similar disciplines, staff members of two camps, and the engagement of the undergraduate students with the adults with disabilities.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of how direct contact with individuals with disabilities impacts college student attitudes, a mixed-methods study was developed. Authors sought and gained IRB approval through their institution (Project H12356 Attitudes Towards People With Disabilities) and received a letter of support from the camp director at the location of the camp. When considering studies attempting to assess the impacts of volunteering, impact assessment is sometimes used. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) defines impact as “any change resulting from an activity, project, or organisation. It includes intended as well as unintended effects, negative as well as positive, and long-term as well as short-term” (p. 3). According to *A Guide*

to *Impact Assessment Within Volunteer Involving Organisations* (2009), several suggestions are made. One is that a combination of quantitative and qualitative (mixed methods) approaches is likely to be the most effective in gaining an overall picture of the impact. Another suggestion is to collect baseline data (pretest) as well as additional data after a project has been concluded (posttest). Finally, the *Guide* emphasizes the importance of sharing the results of the impact assessment with all stakeholders involved in the assessment process. All of these suggestions were incorporated in the current study.

Students ($N = 19$) were given the opportunity to participate in the research project as approved through the Institutional Review Board. The day prior to the campers arriving, research participants completed two instruments: (a) Demographic and Open-Ended Questionnaire and (b) Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (MAS; *Findler, Vilchinsky, & Werner, 2007*). During the week, research participants kept daily journals where they reflected on their experiences as camp counselors. Journal prompts for each day included "What were your experiences with people with disabilities today?" and "What did you learn from your experiences with people with disabilities today?"

After the completion of camp, research participants completed posttest versions of the Demographic and Open-Ended Questionnaire and MAS. Due to participant fatigue, posttesting was not completed on the last day of camp. Participants were asked to return all study materials (posttests and journals) in the week following the camp experience. Three students failed to return their journals and posttest materials.

The Demographic and Open-Ended Questionnaire was a researcher-designed form created to gather information regarding spring break expectations (pretest) and spring break reflections (posttest). Specifically, the pretest asked respondents: (a) Describe your spring break plans, (b) What do you want to learn or accomplish during your spring break? (c) What are you most looking forward to? (d) What are you least looking forward to? and (e) What experiences have you had working with people with disabilities? The posttest version asked respondents: (a) Did this week meet your expectations? Why or why not? (b) What did you learn or accomplish this week? (c) What was your best experience? (d) What was your worst experience? (e) What stories did you tell your friend(s) and/or roommates when you returned from spring break? and (f) How do you think that your spring break experience will affect your future? In addition to their responses to the

open-ended questions, research participants also provided general demographic (but nonidentifying) information.

The Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (*Findler et al., 2007*) provides respondents with a vignette to consider:

Imagine the following situation. Joseph/Michelle went out for lunch with some friends to a coffee shop. A man/woman in a wheelchair, with whom Joseph/Michelle is not acquainted, enters the coffee shop and joins the group. Joseph/Michelle is introduced to this person, and shortly thereafter, everyone else leaves, with only Joseph/Michelle and the man/woman in the wheelchair remaining alone together at the table. Try to imagine the situation.

Respondents were then asked to identify how likely they are to experience certain emotions, cognitions, and behaviors based on their perspective of the provided vignette. Specifically, respondents were provided with the following prompts:

People experience a variety of *emotions (cognitions/behaviors)* when they are involved in such a situation. In the next column is a list of possible *emotions (cognitions/behaviors)*, which may arise before, during and/or after such a situation. Please rate on each line the likelihood that this *emotion (cognition)* might arise in Joseph/Michelle.

When addressing the behavioral domain, participants responded to the following prompt: "Please rate on each line the likelihood that Joseph/Michelle would *behave* in the following manner."

Study participants completed the MAS one day prior to the beginning of the experience and the week following the experience.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this article, only qualitative and quantitative results from the journals and the MAS are incorporated; results from the Demographic and Open-Ended Questionnaire were not included in the analysis (however, information from these forms was used to report gender, major, and year in school) due to being outside the scope of the current research question. Additionally, quantitative results were reported and analyzed as mean scores

on each item for a comparison between pre- and posttest scores. Higher level statistical analyses were not conducted; however, the results were included to offer supporting data for the qualitative data analyzed from participant journals.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). According to these authors, conventional content analysis focuses on deriving coding categories and themes directly from the data (in the current study, the data analyzed was in the form of participant journals), and they suggest that this approach is best utilized when attempting "to describe a phenomenon" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279) as opposed to matching codes to existing relevant theory. Contact theory helped to form a theoretical foundation for the current study; however, data were not analyzed according to the components of contact theory because the authors were interested in understanding the participants' experiences rather than matching their experiences to the components of the theory.

Once all journals were submitted, they were typed into a word processing program. Each study participant selected a pseudonym unknown to the researchers, which was used when typing and coding the journal entries. Once in electronic format, all journals were read independently by each author for complete understanding and immersion (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Of particular note related to data analysis is that both authors were also present during the week-long experience and had lived the experience alongside study participants. After reading through all of the journals, the authors began to identify words that were repeated in the text. As these words were recognized more and more, the authors began to collect them into terms that were representative of more than one key thought (e.g., category of ideas; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Finally, categories based on the words that were repeated and representative of larger ideas became the presented themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Although this conventional content analysis did not begin with predetermined codes or categories (e.g., directed content analysis), existing theory was addressed in the discussion. As suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), "relevant theories or other research findings are addressed in the discussion section of the study" (p. 1279). In accord with this recommendation, findings were compared to contact theory, volunteerism, and alternative spring break experiences. Ultimately, responses were examined to address the research question, "Does direct contact with individuals with

developmental disabilities positively alter college student attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities?”

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), when using conventional content analysis, trustworthiness and credibility can be developed through (among other means) prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. As the authors of this article were present throughout all of the training and the entire week-long experience, it is felt that the criteria of prolonged engagement and persistent observation were met as means of developing trustworthiness. Additionally, quantitative data collected through the MAS were used to triangulate study findings.

Quantitative Results

Immediately before and shortly after their experience involving direct contact with adults with developmental disabilities, participants were asked to complete the affective, cognitive, and emotional components of the Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (MAS; *Findler et al., 2007*). Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the level of likelihood of Joseph/Michelle experiencing various emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. Results from pre- and posttests are reported by domains below.

Affective Domain

Quantitative data from the MAS showed that most participants suggested that many of the negative emotions would decrease in the provided scenario after they had direct contact with participants with developmental disabilities, and most participants suggested that many of the positive emotions would increase after the same experience (see Figure 1). Specifically, scores for the following emotions decreased: nervousness (by .80), shyness (by .57), pity (by .55), stress (by .35), being upset (by .32), fear (by .32), tension (by .26), helplessness (by .12), guilt (by .06), and alertness (by .02). However, a few negative emotions measured by the MAS did increase: shame (by .16), disgust (by .24), and depression (by .28). Several positive emotions increased: serenity (by .87), calmness (by .87), and relaxation (by .97). Of particular note, the emotion with the greatest point value decrease from pretest to posttest was nervousness, and the emotions with the greatest point value increases from pretest to posttest were serenity, calmness, and relaxation.

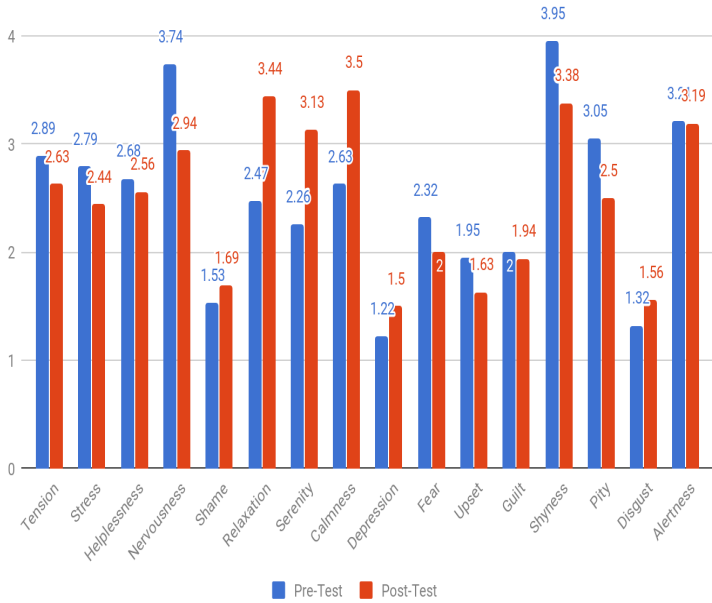


Figure 1. The likelihood that this emotion might arise (1 = Not at all; 5 = Very much)

Cognitive Domain

All of the provided prompts in the cognitive domain were positive in nature and reflected thoughts that the individual in the vignette might have had. All posttest mean scores (4.12) were higher than pretest mean scores (3.70; see Figure 2). Three cognitive statements appeared to have low increases from pretest to posttest: “He/she will appreciate it if I start a conversation” increased by .20; “I can make him/her feel more comfortable” increased by .22; and “He/she will enjoy getting to know me” increased by .26. Several cognitive statements appeared to have moderate increases: “He/she seems to be an interesting guy/girl” (.30 increase); “Why not get to know him/her better?” (.33 increase); “I enjoy meeting new people” (.47 increase); and “He/she looks like an OK person” (.49 increase). The cognitive statements that appeared to have the highest increase from pre- to posttest were “I can always talk with him/her about things that interest both of us” (.55); “He/she looks friendly” (.68); and “We may get along really well” (.76).

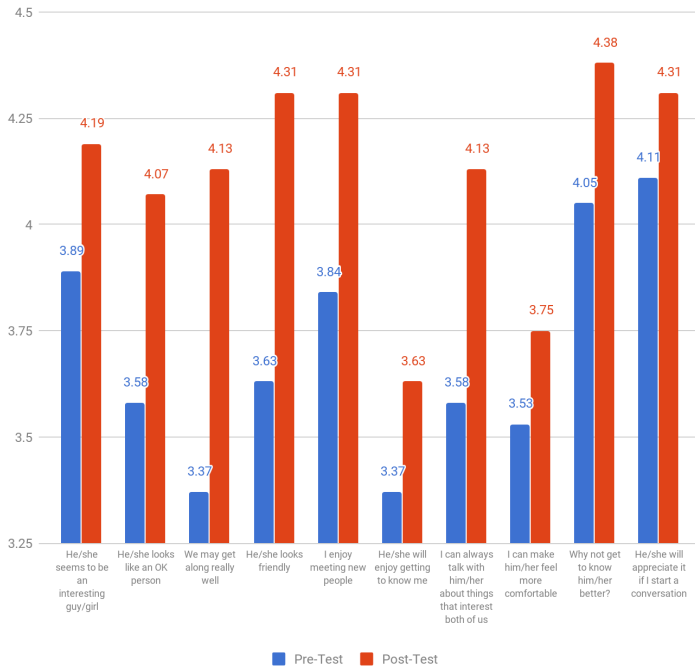


Figure 2. The likelihood that this cognition might arise (1 = Not at all; 5 = Very much)

Behavioral Domain

When asked to indicate the likelihood of Joseph or Michelle engaging in specific behaviors, scores for seven of the eight behaviors decreased from pretest to posttest (see Figure 3). It is worth noting that six of the behaviors that participants suggested would decrease were negative in nature. For example, the behaviors “Find an excuse to leave,” “Move to another table,” “Continue what he/she was doing,” “Move away,” “Read the newspaper or talk on a cell phone,” and “Get up and leave” decreased by .85, .51, .50, .42, .30, and .14 respectively. “Start a conversation” (a positive idea) decreased by .01 and “Initiate a conversation if he/she doesn’t make the first move” (a positive idea) increased by .05.

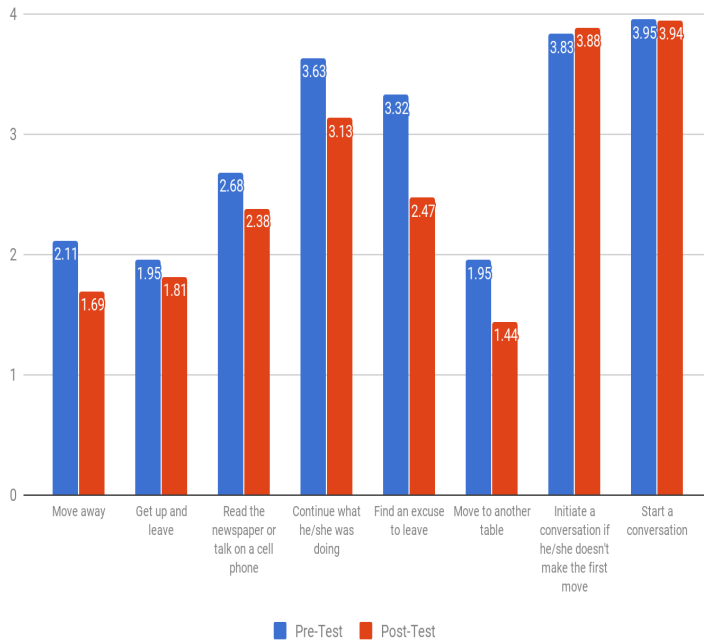


Figure 3. The likelihood that Joseph/Michelle might behave in this manner (1 = Not at all; 5 = Very much)

Qualitative Results

Following the process described above, three themes appeared to emerge from the journal entries: *transformation*, *enlightenment*, and *adjourning*. The following sections will explain and define each theme and provide evidence from participant journals to support the inclusion of the theme.

Transformation

The first stage, *transformation*, indicates a rapid adaptation, as well as a shift or change in what participants thought this experience would be like. The majority of students, in their initial journal entries, acknowledged feeling anxious, nervous, worried, and hesitant in knowing how to talk and interact with the adults with disabilities. Students expressed these feelings in their journals. One student wrote, "I was really hesitant about talking to them. But afterward, they were pretty cool. I mean honestly, it's about looking past the surface into the heart of these individuals." Another detailed her reactions at length:

I regret ever second guessing coming on this trip. I think that it wasn't so much that I would miss out on the beach with my friends, but rather that I wasn't sure if I could do the job. Natural instinct seem to kick in once the campers arrived. I loved learning about the different women in my cabin they were all so unique and I loved getting to know their personalities.

One student summarized this sentiment quite succinctly: "Campers arrived. Anxiety lessened."

Enlightenment

The second stage which emerged was *enlightenment*, which indicates new insights, awareness, and understanding. By the second or third day of camp, students were writing about discoveries and observations regarding their preconceived ideas about adults with disabilities. Students described these revelations using words such as *surprised*, *astonished*, and *shocked*. One common discovery focused on the realization that there were more similarities than differences. For example: "At camp we are all the same. We are all people who **HAPPEN** to have something that makes us unique"; "They are just regular young adults with interests like me such as jokes and silliness, boys, and a love for texting"; and "What surprised me the most about our campers is how creative and funny each one is." Other students observed: "I am seeing them more as friends than 'campers'" and "I've realized in reality, I can be patient enough in order to wait for someone as amazing as these people to take longer than the average person needs to . . . because in reality, they are just as normal as you and I." Another student noted: "The campers have their own strengths and weaknesses just like everybody else . . . because they are like everyone else."

This sentiment was echoed by another student, who wrote:

One thing that I have finally learned while in college is that everyone's "weird" in some sense and everyone is so unique. Differences are something you have to learn to deal with in college or you will never get along in the world. People with disabilities are the same as everyone else, sometimes just maybe their differences [are] a little more obvious. Treating people with disabilities just as you treat everyone else [is] something that I hope I do in my everyday life.

Several students reflected that although they anticipated being the ones to give something to the campers, they were the ones who received more than expected. For example, "Less and less I thought of camp in terms of me assisting others. Instead, it became about all of us working together throughout the day. We weren't campers and counselors anymore."

Students expressed thoughts about gaining confidence as well as changes in their perspectives:

I wish I could live my life like everyone here lives. I have gained more confidence because of the campers. They have lifted my spirits up. This has been one of the happiest I have been in a really long time and one of the best weeks I have had.

Another student wrote:

It is so hard to sum up this entire week because I really do believe that camp has changed my perspective on all situations. You never know just by looking at someone that they had a disorder or illness. And those things don't even matter because I have had the most fun I have ever had with those people.

Adjournment

The last stage noted was *adjournment*, which is the ending or conclusion of an event or an experience. It can involve both looking backward (reflection) and looking forward (application). Students' feelings about their experience coming to an end surfaced in journals the day before and the day of leaving camp. One student stated: "I am going to be heartbroken tomorrow to see all of them go." Another commented, "I really didn't think saying good-bye would be that tough." A third wrote,

The last day was somewhat surreal and I am not even sure that it ever really hit me that I may never see these people again. I loved seeing how grateful the parents were when they came to get campers. I will never forget my week at camp and already have my picture hanging in my room.

Other students expressed feeling both sad and stressed (to be back at school) and also having trouble sleeping: “My mind is racing about camp and everything about it.” Another commented: “I’m just at a loss for words to express how amazing and life-changing this week was for me.” A third expressed eagerness to repeat the experience:

I am so glad I got to come this year. Really. The only regret I have is that I have to wait a whole year to go to camp again. Might as well just sign me up now. I now understand what people say when they talk about how your campers will grow, but you will grow just as much if not more.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to address the research question, “Does direct contact with individuals with developmental disabilities positively alter college student attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities?” Study findings suggest it does. The specific quantitative results, combined with the themes identified through analysis of participant journals (i.e., transformation, enlightenment, and adjournment), suggest that positive experiences did result from direct contact with adults with developmental disabilities. Additionally, findings from the current study were supported through literature reviewed related to college students, volunteerism, working with individuals with disabilities, and contact theory. Of highest note related directly to the research question, all participants stated that they were positively impacted by the experience. Results will be discussed in relation to volunteering, contact theory, and disability. In addition, study limitations and suggestions for future research will be offered.

Volunteering

When considering study results in light of research reviewed related to volunteering in general and specifically through alternative spring break trips, there appeared to be three major outcomes: (a) changes in perceptions of self, (b) changes in perceptions of others, and (c) increased appreciation for social issues (Mann & DeAngelo, 2016).

Changes in perceptions of self. The concept *changes in perception of self* (Mann & DeAngelo, 2016) suggests that personal growth and development occur in participants who volunteer for these

types of experiences. Additionally, specific personal benefits can be developed that would allow participants to progress in how they see the world (McGlone et al., 2011). It is important to note that changes in perceptions of self is not a negative concept to be equated with the idea of selfishness or viewed as the primary rationale for why individuals engage in volunteer experiences. Take, for example, the following quote from one study participant:

They are absolutely amazing people and I will continue working with individuals like them the rest of my life. Meeting them has changed a lot about me in that I respect them so much more and will be patient and talk to a person with a disability with more ease the next time I meet someone. They let you be yourself and don't judge you ever and I love that about them. Each person at camp has touched my heart and I will never forget them.

The ideas suggested here vividly demonstrate personal growth and development *for the volunteer*. Changes in perception of self as identified in the current study appear to directly connect to Mann and DeAngelo's (2016) and McGlone et al.'s (2011) idea of personal growth and development. This concept was also clearly seen through the identified themes of transformation and enlightenment.

Although the theme of adjournment might not initially bring to mind ideas of changes in perception of self, the following quote related to the theme of adjournment reflects this idea:

Not only was it sad seeing the campers go, but also saying goodbye to the other counselors. Even though we all go to the same school, going back to school means having responsibilities again and we probably will not see each other much. I had a great, meaningful week and wish it didn't end! I am not sure what the long term effects of going to camp will be on me, but I know that it changed my life. I am just not sure how yet.

In this quote, the participant is reflecting back on their experience and looking to make personal application from lessons learned; this participant has changed and grown through the experience.

Finally, in relation to the concept of changes in perception of self, one participant suggested:

In all honesty, I'm kinda not ready to leave. This week has been irreplaceable and a much better spring break. Rather than being selfish, I have given back and been taught some things by a diverse and awesome community/group of adults. I would not trade the memories and friendships made this week for the world and really look forward to coming back next year!

The ability of the participant to recognize that they made a better choice by participating in this experience and that they gained memories and friendships demonstrates that growth and change occurred.

In relation to the research question, "Does direct contact with individuals with developmental disabilities positively alter college student attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities?" it appears that study participants increased their positive feelings as a result of their self-focused rationale for participation.

Changes in perceptions of others. In addition to changing perceptions about themselves and gaining personal insights through direct contact with adults with developmental disabilities, study participants also developed an appreciation for others (Mann & DeAngelo, 2016). Findings from the current study were consistent with findings from other authors suggesting that study participants might gain an appreciation for others (Howe & Strauss, 2007; South, 2010). Analysis of participant journals indicated a clear change in participant perceptions of the adults with developmental disabilities.

I currently have no clue what anyone's disabilities are here at camp . . . besides some obvious ones. I thought I'd learn more about disabilities by being here, but we really don't dwell on that, which I think is an important part of camp. This isn't a place for us to learn about disabilities, it's a place for them to feel free from their disabilities, or at least not have to feel singled out because of it. I'm curious to learn more, but I wouldn't risk my campers' having a good time for something that I can google.

The above quote appears to suggest a change in perceptions due to direct contact with the adults with developmental disabilities. The context of the quote suggests that the participant initially anticipated learning about campers' disabilities, but, over time, focus on

disability became less important. Study participants used words like *surprised* and *impressed* to describe their thoughts and feelings related to camper behaviors and accomplishments. Quotes like “what surprised me the most about our campers is how creative and funny each one is” and “because in reality, they are just as normal as you and I” show how participants’ perceptions toward others changed during the course of the week.

Mann and DeAngelo’s (2016) notion of changing perceptions of others is most clearly demonstrated in the theme *transformation*. In this theme participants identified a new way of seeing the campers and a new way of conceptualizing their abilities. Study participants’ transformation regarding camper abilities was seen in all of the journal data entries. The transformation took longer for some participants, but by their final journal entry, all participants had increased recognition of abilities in the adults with developmental disabilities. Ultimately, study participants had their perceptions changed because of their direct contact with the adults with developmental disabilities.

The quantitative data also provided an additional source of information related to participants’ changes in perceptions regarding the adults with developmental disabilities. Examining the affective domain, emotions such as nervousness, shyness, and pity decreased from pretest to posttest, whereas emotions such as serenity, calmness, and relaxation all increased from pre- to posttest. As mentioned in the results, all of the cognitive statements on the MAS were positive in nature, and they all increased from pretest to posttest. Finally, all of the negative behaviors measured on the MAS also decreased from pretest to posttest.

It is worth noting that the two behaviors regarding engaging in conversations remained substantially unchanged from pretest to posttest. One possible reason for this appears to be that study participants were already comfortable engaging in conversation because of training that was provided before the experience. The trainings focused extensively on how to create conversation and engage adults with developmental disabilities in meaningful discussions. These training experiences may have led to higher pretest scores. These two behaviors regarding conversation were not indicative of the overall quantitative results: The full quantitative results support the qualitative findings that there were changes in the perceptions of study participants regarding those they served.

Increased appreciation for social issues. Mann and DeAngelo’s (2016) findings that participation in volunteer experi-

ences can also lead to increased appreciation for social issues was also seen in the current study. For participants in the current study, this was recognized in two ways: (a) reconsideration of the abilities of the adults with developmental disabilities and (b) anticipation of how participants' future behaviors may be impacted as a result of the experience. Since the idea of reconceptualizing the abilities of the campers has already been discussed in the section "Changes in Perceptions of Others," this section will address how study participants suggested that their experience may impact their future plans and careers.

As one participant stated, "I will definitely be interested in trying out these sort of opportunities again, as well as donating time/money once I am out of college." The experience affected participants so strongly that they expressed openness toward investing both time and money in the future. This desire for future investment clearly demonstrates an increased appreciation for the social issue of engaging with adults with developmental disabilities. In support of this idea, another participant stated,

I feel that I will definitely try to volunteer as much and often as I possibly can in the future with individuals with disabilities. I had an amazing week and being with those individuals in the short time I had with them made me realize how much I respect each of them.

Again, this participant has expressed a desire to increase the amount of time spent volunteering with this population. As mentioned previously, it can be inferred from the existence of legislation regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities and advocating for their rights that not everyone is interested in volunteering and supporting the rights of those with disabilities. Participants in the current study appeared to discover a different perspective as they developed a desire to increase their engagement with adults with developmental disabilities. Perhaps the most telling quote that points to increased appreciation for social issues focuses on plans for the future: "After this week, I'm really considering if this is the kind of career I want to have."

Increased appreciation for social issues was most clearly seen through the themes of enlightenment and adjournment. In these themes, study participants not only identified increased appreciation for social issues, but they also thought through plans and suggested avenues on how they could effect relevant social changes. It appears that direct contact with adults with developmental disabili-

ties led study participants to an increased appreciation for social issues.

Contact Theory

In addition to supporting ideas from Mann and DeAngelo (2016), findings from the current study also supported concepts formulating the basis for contact theory. According to Allport (1954), favorable attitudes regarding an experience are likely to develop when the following conditions are met: (a) equal status in a rewarding experience, (b) personal contact over time, and (c) common goals exist. In the current study, all three of these criteria were observed.

Equal status in a rewarding experience. From analyzing all of the qualitative and quantitative data, there is no question that this was a positive experience for study participants. Their journals were full of positive sentiments suggesting that the experience was anything from “excellent” to “life-changing.” Of more interesting note is Allport’s (1954) idea that for a positive experience to result, there also needs to be equal status. Study participants were counselors at the camp. By definition, this would be a status incongruity, rather than equality; however, the following quote offers insight into the participants’ perspectives related to their role as a counselor: “Less and less I thought of camp in terms of me assisting others. Instead, it became about all of us working together throughout the day. We weren’t campers and counselors anymore.” The counselors started to focus less on their role as counselors (power inequity) and more on how they were similar to the participants. This was also seen through the themes of transformation and enlightenment and connects back to Mann and DeAngelo’s (2016) idea of increased appreciation for others.

Personal contact over time. Allport (1954) also stated that for positive experiences to result, there must be personal contact over time. In the current study, there is no doubt that personal contact between study participants and adults with developmental disabilities existed. Study participants stayed in cabins with the campers, led activities with the campers, ate meals with the campers, and provided constant encouragement and support to them for 5 days. The potential limitation with this concept is time—is 5 days enough time for individuals to develop personal relationships that can lead to positive experiences? Results from all three themes (transformation, enlightenment, and adjournment) and the quantitative findings from the MAS suggest that it is. Within the literature (Mann &

DeAngelo, 2016), the question still remains regarding the length of time necessary for volunteer experiences such as alternative spring break trips to have an impact on participants. Findings from the current study suggest that positive experiences can happen in this time frame; additional research exploring the long-term effects of such programs is necessary.

Common goals. The final component necessary for positive experiences according to Allport (1954) is the presence of common goals. As would be expected in an experience like this, common goals between counselors (study participants) and campers (adults with developmental disabilities) existed. This was seen most obviously through the concept of encouragement. Both counselors and campers wanted to succeed and see each other be successful. One study participant stated, “Today I realized the power of encouragement and the power of smiles. One girl in our group did the zip line when she absolutely did not want to at all, b/c two other campers encouraged her.” In this quote, the concept of shared goals and shared success is present.

Another example highlighting the concept of common goals occurred on the zip line.

Everyone was very excited. When it came time for Ralph to go, he wanted me to walk up the tower with him. Once we were at the top he got very scared and didn't want to go anymore saying that it was too scary. We were finally able to get him hooked up and to the edge little by little and step by step. Everyone on the ground began cheering for him and he finally was able to muster up enough courage to jump off. Once he did he was again immediately loving every minute of it!

There are two components to this quote that help support the idea of common goals. First, the adult with developmental disabilities was looking to the counselor to support him, and the counselor wanted to provide that support. It was a reciprocal relationship suggesting they both had the same goal. Second, common goals existed among the campers. Everyone on the ground wanted to see Ralph succeed and encouraged him to accomplish his goal. It was through the developing, progressing toward, and achieving common goals that a positive experience developed.

Suggestions for Future Research; Limitations

The current study had a small sample size, and the participants were a self-selected group of students (primarily female) who completed an application to be included in the alternative spring break trip. For future research, recommendations are to increase the sample size and identify a comparison group of students engaged in other spring break experiences. In addition, it would be beneficial to repeat the posttests after a longer time period to measure long-term impact and outcomes of the experience. Data collection methods could be broadened to include interviews and focus groups with the research participants. Future research might also test the robustness of the three themes identified in this study, moving toward developing a stage theory of volunteerism with individuals with disabilities. Finally, as suggested in the *Guide to Impact Assessment Within Volunteer Involving Organisations (2009)*, it is important to share the results of impact assessment with all stakeholders involved in the assessment process. A strength of the current study is that a presentation summarizing key findings was given to the core staff of the two camps involved in the study.

Conclusion

The current research project sought to answer the question, “Does direct contact with individuals with developmental disabilities positively alter college student attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities?” Existing research suggests that millennials desire to make a contribution to society and have values that support the importance of giving back (*Howe & Strauss, 2007*). However, when working with individuals with disabilities there can be limitations regarding individuals’ willingness to offer assistance. In the current study, changes in participant perceptions were noted from the pre- to posttest on the Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (*Findler et. al., 2007*). Of particular note, study findings appeared to mirror findings from Mann and DeAngelo (2016), where participants experienced (a) changes in perceptions of self, (b) changes in perceptions of others, and (c) increased appreciation for social issues. Additionally, findings from the current study suggested that direct contact with adults with developmental disabilities did lead to the development of positive attitudes. Through the intentional use of Allport’s (1954) principles of contact theory (equal status in a rewarding experience, personal contact over time, and common goals), an environment was created to positively impact study participant perceptions. Through the themes of transformation, enlightenment, and adjournment,

study participants clearly enhanced their perceptions of adults with developmental disabilities. The following final quote sums up the participants' experiences and their changes in attitudes:

And I felt this whole week that this volunteer option, to me, was such a small way to give back to people. However, in reality, to them, it is the biggest thing we can give to them. They just long for people to treat them like we do everyone else and to be a part of what they have to offer, even if it may take a little longer. And I've realized that I can be patient enough in order to wait for someone as amazing as these people to take longer than the average person needs to in order to do something, because in reality, they are just as normal as you and I.

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