

Research on Incentive Mechanism of University Volunteer Service from the Institutionalization Perspective

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Abstract: University volunteer service serves as an important vehicle for advancing the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and promoting the cultivation and practice of core socialist values. In recent years, substantial progress has been made in developing incentive mechanisms for university volunteer service in China. Nevertheless, several persistent challenges remain, including the lack of detailed institutional rules, inconsistent implementation standards, insufficient credit transformation, weak publicity and support, and inadequate long-term effectiveness of volunteer culture. Based on questionnaire surveys and field investigations from the institutionalization perspective, this study reviews relevant policy documents and institutional arrangements and examines the underlying causes of existing problems. It proposes policy recommendations across five dimensions: top-level institutional design, digital evaluation, differentiated incentives, implementation support, and cultural cultivation. The findings provide policy implications for promoting the sustainable and high-quality development of university volunteer service.

Key words: Institutionalization; Volunteer Service; Incentive Mechanism

1. Introduction

The university volunteer service incentive system refers to the sum of institutional arrangements designed to stimulate college students' internal motivation for volunteer participation and guarantee the sustainable and sound development of volunteer services. It constitutes a critical support for promoting the normalization, institutionalization and long-term development of university volunteer service. China has successively issued 13 policy documents including Regulations on Volunteer Service and Interim Measures for the Administration of Student Volunteer Service. Provincial-level implementing rules have been formulated across all provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government, forming a two-tier policy system featuring national top-level design and local supporting implementation. To fully understand the status quo of incentive mechanism construction for university volunteer service, the research group adopts literature research, questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to 91 universities of various types across 31 provinces and municipalities in China, with 8000 valid questionnaires collected. Thirty-five policy documents were systematically reviewed, and 30 teachers in charge of university Communist Youth League committees and college student volunteers were interviewed. A four-dimensional analytical framework of "policy-institution-implementation-effect" is constructed to ensure authentic survey data and objective research conclusions, laying a solid foundation for analyzing problems and putting forward countermeasures and suggestions.

2. General Situation of Incentive Mechanism Construction for University Volunteer Service

According to the investigation results, Chinese universities have generally established an incentive institutional framework covering five dimensions: spiritual honors, material support, growth-oriented development, credit evaluation and organizational culture, with supporting carriers for each incentive measure. More than 75 % of college students have participated in volunteer service, reflecting a solid participant foundation for campus volunteer activities. Most universities have implemented basic incentives such as commendation and awards, activity insurance, second-class curriculum credit recognition and online service-hour registration. Digital volunteer management platforms are gaining popularity, and over half of students hold positive attitudes toward existing basic incentives. The institutional framework basically conforms to the work orientation of the Communist Youth League Central Committee, which prioritizes spiritual incentives and links up with the education system, and can arouse students' short-term enthusiasm for participation to a certain extent.

Nevertheless, 35 %-47 % of surveyed students only rated various incentive systems as “average”, which reveals the prominent problem of “framework in place yet insufficient detailed rules and poor implementation”. At the institutional design level, fine-tuned institutional design and cross-departmental coordination mechanisms are deficient. Supporting detailed rules for hierarchical and classified incentives as well as credit achievement conversion are missing. At the implementation level, shortages exist in full-time staff, special-purpose funds and functional supply of digital platforms. Normalized supervision and policy publicity mechanisms are absent. Consequently, implementation standards of incentives differ greatly among universities and faculties. Students have low awareness of incentive policies, and credit evaluation systems become formalistic. Meanwhile, utilitarian tendencies are obvious in students' volunteer participation. External incentives can hardly be transformed into internal conscious actions. Long-term incentives for volunteer service lack appeal, and the educational effectiveness of relevant institutions cannot be fully exerted.

3. Existing Problems and Causes of Incentive Mechanism for University Volunteer Service

3.1 Inconsistent implementation standards of incentive institutions and uneven practical outcomes

The stringency of procedures for incentive selection, subsidy distribution and credit recognition is largely subject to discretionary control of faculties. Common phenomena include inadequate public notification for awards, delayed subsidy disbursement and long audit cycles for volunteer service hours. Some students commented: “For the same large-scale event volunteer assignment, our faculty only issues a certificate, while another faculty provides subsidies plus extra credits. Standards are entirely subject to teachers' decisions.” 43.27 % of surveyed students regard imperfect incentive institutions as the primary factor hindering continuous participation. The core cause lies in the fact that university Communist Youth League committees mainly focus on organizing volunteer activities and supporting large-scale events, lacking long-term thinking on incentive construction. Incentives are merely treated as auxiliary tools for activities. Moreover, without normalized supervision and assessment mechanisms as well as standard supervision and rectification procedures, policy implementation lacks rigid constraints, which continuously undermines institutional credibility.

3.2 Homogenized incentive approaches failing to satisfy personalized demands of diverse volunteers

Current incentive measures are mostly limited to certificates, credits and small-scale material rewards, without differentiating demands among ordinary volunteers, long-term service providers, volunteer backbones and special-project volunteers, which reduces the attractiveness of incentives. Multiple students reported: “Identical certificates are granted regardless of service duration or volunteer types. There is little difference between more and less

service input, so it is difficult to maintain long-term motivation.” Nearly 80 % of surveyed students agree that incentive homogenization is a serious problem. At the institutional design level, national and provincial policies only set out principled requirements, while universities fail to formulate supporting hierarchical and classified implementing rules. Volunteer incentive measures fall under multiple departments including the Communist Youth League committees, student affairs offices and logistics departments. Disconnected institutions and fragmented procedures are observed. 17.18 % of surveyed students report severe fragmentation of various incentives, making it impossible to form a complete incentive closed loop.

3.3 Single-function credit evaluation system with difficulties in transforming credit records into practical incentives

Most universities only complete volunteer-hour entry and archiving via online platforms. Credit points and service evaluation lack practical transformation scenarios such as campus preferential treatment, internship resources and cadre selection. Credit records remain confined to paper or electronic archives. One student noted: “Hundreds of volunteer hours are accumulated on the online system, but the records can only be screenshotted. They play no role in merit evaluation or campus welfare, rendering long-hour registration practically meaningless.” 22.15 % of surveyed students consider the credit evaluation system formalistic. On the one hand, digital platforms lag in functional development and only support basic data entry, without auxiliary modules for point redemption or online award application. On the other hand, top-level institutions have not defined mandatory weights of volunteer credit records in Party membership recommendation and comprehensive performance assessment. Digital tools are disconnected from educational policies, so credit incentives lose practical value.

3.4 Insufficient publicity of incentive policies and low student awareness of incentive rules

A large number of students remain uninformed of credit-recognition rules, bonus standards for merit evaluation, subsidy application procedures and credit incentive policies, so institutional dividends cannot benefit student groups. Many students mentioned: “I only learn about volunteer hours when signing up for activities. No one explains what can be redeemed or how to obtain extra credits. Most policy information is obtained casually from classmates.” Questionnaire results show that 43.54 % of students are unfamiliar with local incentive rules of their universities. Root causes include the absence of full-time volunteer-service staff in universities, with relevant work undertaken by part-time Communist Youth League cadres and counselors. Limited manpower prevents regular policy popularization. In addition, special funds for volunteer service are insufficient, resulting in inadequate resources for publicity materials, thematic lectures and cultural activities, together with single information-dissemination channels.

3.5 Poor sustainability of volunteer organizational culture with weak volunteers’ sense of belonging and long-term willingness to participate

Campus volunteer sharing activities, team-building events and volunteer culture festivals are mostly held for short-term large-scale activities. Normalized care mechanisms and brand-building systems for long-term and new-recruit volunteers are insufficient, leading to high volunteer turnover after short-term participation. Among samples, 28.66 % of surveyed students never took part in volunteer service monthly, and 24.04 % never participated at all. As some volunteers described: “Group chats are dissolved right after activities. There are no regular exchanges. Volunteer work feels like task-fulfillment rather than a cause, so it is hard to build a sense of belonging.” On the student side, obvious utilitarian participation motives prevail. Many students join volunteer programs merely for credits or merit-evaluation bonuses, with weak recognition of volunteer spirit and organizational culture. On the university side, there is no normalized system for volunteer-culture cultivation. Brand-featured volunteer teams and care systems for long-term volunteers are absent. Reliance merely on external material and credit incentives cannot foster sustainable volunteer consciousness.

4. Construction Paths for Incentive Mechanism of University Volunteer Service

4.1 Strengthen top-level overall planning and establish an integrated and refined institutional system

First, it is suggested to issue the national unified Hierarchical and Classified Implementing Rules for University Volunteer Service Incentives, setting differentiated incentive standards for short-term, long-term, backbone and special-project volunteers to fill gaps in hierarchical and classified institutions. Second, build a cross-departmental coordination mechanism led by university Communist Youth League committees and involving student-affairs offices, logistics departments, information centers and faculties. The whole process of credit recognition, credit registration, material guarantee and commendation shall be interconnected to solve institutional fragmentation. Third, implement an annual normalized assessment mechanism for incentive effectiveness. Shortcomings shall be identified through annual questionnaires and student forums, and internal implementing measures shall be dynamically revised. Unified campus-wide implementation standards together with supervision-rectification mechanisms shall be established to impose rigid constraints for institutional implementation.

4.2 Upgrade the digital credit evaluation system and realize the transformation and application of credit outcomes

Iterate and upgrade the national digital platform for college-student volunteer service. Improve functions including service-hour error correction and automatic credit-point calculation. Add practical scenarios such as point-redeemable training opportunities, campus services and internship resources, so as to change the status quo where credit records “are only archived without practical application”. Top-level documents shall specify mandatory weights of volunteer credit records in Party-member recommendation, comprehensive assessment and employment referral. A talent reserve pool for young backbones consisting of long-term outstanding volunteers shall be established to activate the real effects of credit-based incentives.

4.3 Innovate diversified hierarchical-classified incentives to tackle homogenized supply

Set multi-level spiritual honor systems including star-rated volunteers, annual volunteer models and advanced special-project representatives, and publicize role models both online and offline. Growth-oriented incentives shall be tailored for different groups: credits and merit-evaluation preferences for long-term volunteers; skill training and internship access for volunteer backbones; orientation lectures and minor commendations for new volunteers. Unify national subsidy standards for transportation, catering and activity insurance for university volunteer projects. Diversify physical rewards such as books, cultural-creative products and learning supplies, and narrow guarantee gaps among universities and activities.

4.4 Complete implementation guarantees and smooth channels for policy publicity and execution

Include the implementation performance of volunteer-service incentive institutions into the annual assessment system for university Communist Youth League committees, and conduct special supervision over universities with delayed or lax implementation. Encourage universities to appoint full-time volunteer-service administrators and allocate special-purpose funds for volunteer service, to guarantee resources for subsidy disbursement, policy publicity and cultural events. Fully deploy online systems for incentive application and audit to shorten approval and claim cycles. Meanwhile, incorporate incentive policies into freshmen orientation education, Communist Youth League lectures and thematic class meetings. Produce short-video and graphic interpretative materials, and set policy-interpretation booths at volunteer activity venues to eliminate information barriers for students in multiple ways.

4.5 Foster long-term volunteer organizational culture and cultivate internal participation consciousness

Regularly hold volunteer-sharing salons, volunteer-service cultural festivals and themed team-building activities. Guide each faculty to develop featured volunteer teams with unique brands. Establish follow-up care mechanisms for long-term volunteers and organize regular exchanges and consolations to enhance their sense of belonging. Rely on Communist Youth League courses and thematic league-day activities to promote volunteer spirit continuously. Guide students to abandon utilitarian participation tendencies and realize the organic integration of external institutional incentives and internal spiritual identification.

Conclusion

In conclusion, improving the incentive mechanism for university volunteer service requires top-level institutional optimization, digital capability upgrading, diversified hierarchical incentives, solid execution guarantees and sustainable volunteer-culture cultivation. These measures can help address formalistic implementation, homogenized incentives and utilitarian participation problems, stimulate college students' endogenous willingness for volunteer engagement, and advance the high-quality and long-term development of university volunteer service.

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