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Experience Corps: Changes in Activity Associated with Participation

Experience Corps[®] (EC) is a program that brings older adults into public elementary schools to improve academic achievement of students, through one-to-one tutoring, small group academic help and assisting teachers. It has been in existence for over 13 years and currently operates in 20 cities across the country. The Atlantic Philanthropies provided funding to Washington University in St. Louis to conduct a national evaluation of EC.

Why is volunteering good for people? In the “social model of health promotion” put forth by Linda Fried and colleagues at Johns Hopkins University,¹ it is proposed that volunteering produces positive outcomes for older adults through physical, cognitive, and social activities associated with the volunteer role.

Through the EC program, most members add 11-15 hours to their weekly schedules. During this time, they add meaningful activity by serving children and teachers; they add social activity by interacting with other members and EC staff, and they add physical and cognitive activity given the demands of the tasks. Yet in adding the hours required of the EC program, other daily activities most probably shift; and these shifts may add to or detract from improving health outcomes.

To increase understanding about volunteering and changes in activities associated with joining EC, we explored changes in daily activities associated with EC participation. This study assessed activity types and levels in a sample of 180 EC members who joined the program in Fall 2006. Through two telephone interviews, level of activity in 15 areas was obtained at the beginning and end of the academic year.

Activities before joining EC

Reported on weekly basis

- 75% attended worship services
- 89% visited with friends and families
- 94% did exercise routine (walking, etc)

Reported on monthly basis:

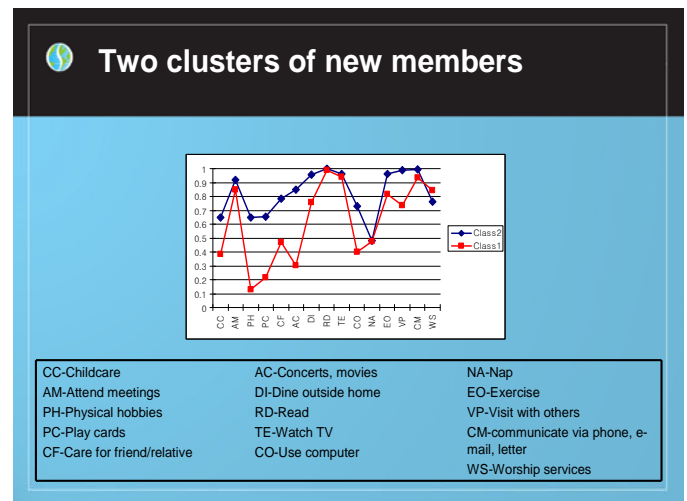
- 91% dined out
- 89% attended meetings, classes
- 67% provided care to a friend or relative
- 65% attended movies, lectures, concerts
- 53% provided child care
- 49% played cards or table games
- 46% did hobbies

Most volunteers spent an average of 15 hours reading, 15 hours watching TV, and 7 hours communicating by phone, letter, or email each week. Over 60% of the volunteers used a computer at least once per week.

There were no previous volunteer activities for 20% of sample, as EC was their first volunteer experience.

High and low activity groups

In an analysis of activity patterns, two groups were identified at pre-test. Thirty-seven percent were classified in the low-activity group. Members in this group participated in 14 of the 15 activities at lower levels than the high-activity group. The low-activity group was older (67 vs 64 yrs.), had lower income and education, and was more likely to be first time volunteers. They also participated at higher rates in religion-related activities.



Changes in activities after a year of EC participation

At post-test, only 17% of the sample was classified as low-activity. This indicates that almost two-thirds of the low-activity group at pretest became more engaged in activities, even while adding on EC participation. Of the 67 EC members in the low-activity group, 42 (63%) moved to the high-activity group at post-test. The members who became more active were more likely to be healthier and have higher incomes than those who remained low-activity. The members who remained low-activity were more likely to be unemployed as opposed to retired or employed.

At post-test, there was no change in participation in activities in the following activities:

- Childcare
- Meetings/classes
- Use of computers
- Communicating with others
- Attending worship services

Yet in the activities where changes were observed, the high and low-activity groups had different patterns of change.

There was more substitution of activity for the high-activity group, probably because they had to eliminate some activity to have time for EC. The high-activity group started doing less in the following activities:

- Hobbies
- Providing care to friends and relatives
- Reading (outside of EC)
- Visiting with friends/family

The low-activity group did not change the amount of time they spent in these activities. They increased their activity going out to movies, concerts, events. They dropped the amount of time they spent exercising.

Both the high-activity and low-activity reduced the amount of time they watched television.

Summary and implications

Two subsamples of new EC members were identified at pre-test: most were in the high- activity group but about 1/3 was low-activity. These low-activity group members were more likely to be first

time volunteers. At the end of the academic year, about 2/3 of the low-activity group was classified as high-activity, as they became more active in non-EC activities.

There was more substitution of activity in the high-activity group -- when they added EC participation, other activities had to drop. On the other hand, low-activity members maintained their level of activity in more areas when adding EC, and increased social activities outside of EC. In this group, displacement of activity seemed to occur only with physical exercise outside of EC. It is important to note that both groups watched less TV and there was no change in child care and worship.

These data demonstrate that there is change in activities when older adults take on high-intensity volunteer roles. It is clear that EC members add 11-15 hours to their week and take on new activities in the schools, which are productive, social, and intergenerational. Additionally, changes in activity take place outside of their time working in the schools. Thus, the EC program involves new activities as well as change in previous activities. It appears that there is less substitution of activity when low-activity older adults join EC. Increased activity level, inside and outside of EC, may indeed be the pathway through which volunteering is health-producing.

¹ Fried, Carlson, Freedman, Frick, Glass, Hill, McGill, Rebok, Seeman, Tielsch, Wasik, & Zeger, 2004

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