

# Community Engagement and Giving Back Among North American Indigenous Youth

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## Abstract

“Volunteer participation” refers to free engagement in activities that benefit someone or something else. Volunteering can produce many benefits for individuals and communities. However, current research examining volunteer participation often excludes diverse viewpoints on what constitutes volunteering, particularly the perspectives of North American Indigenous youth. This oversight may result from researchers’ conceptualization and measurement of volunteering from a Western perspective. Utilizing data from the Healing Pathways (HP) project, a longitudinal, community-based participatory study in partnership with eight Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada, we provide a detailed description of volunteer participation and community and cultural engagement. Overall, we employ a community cultural wealth lens to emphasize the various strengths and sources of resilience that these communities possess. At the same time, we encourage scholars and the wider society to broaden their views of volunteering, community involvement, and giving back.

Individuals can give back and contribute to their communities in many different ways, which may lead to positive outcomes for both these individuals and the communities in which they are involved (Ali et al., 2016; Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Creaven et al., 2018; Hernantes et al., 2019; Khasanzyanova, 2017; Lau et al., 2019; Molsher & Townsend, 2016). Definitions and measures of community involvement, however, are limited. Common measurement tools and conceptualizations have focused on *volunteering*,<sup>1</sup> a term typically defined as engaging in activities that benefit someone or something else such as a person, organization, or cause (Wilson, 2000). The perception of volunteerism within the dominant U.S. culture is derived from a White, Western viewpoint (Jope, 2008; Kerr et al., 2001; Warburton & McLaughlin, 2007; Yap & Biddle, 2012). For example, volunteering often includes particular behaviors that largely take place within formal institutions (Day & Devlin, 1998; Glister, 2012).

This conceptualization of volunteerism may be difficult to identify in Indigenous communities because community involvement more broadly is a key component of their customs, values, and societal functioning. Therefore, in the current study, we aim to expand measurement items and conceptualize more expansively what it means to

give back and help one’s community. We include behaviors that take place within formal institutions as well as actions such as community service, community engagement, and contributions to cultural activities, reflecting the interconnectedness of culture and community. Using data from the Healing Pathways (HP) project, a longitudinal, community-based participatory study in partnership with eight Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada, we consider larger aspects of social connectedness, as other scholars have suggested (Creaven et al., 2018; Warburton & McLaughlin, 2007).

By proposing an expansive definition of helping and giving back that reflects diverse forms of community engagement in Indigenous communities, we also seek to uplift the unique contributions, knowledges, and experiences Indigenous Peoples bring to their communities, which enhance participation among all involved and enrich the quality of the activities taking place. Helping without the expectation of being monetarily paid for one’s service is a necessary component of Indigenous societies and is often an intrinsic behavior in cultural spaces. Elders from the same tribal group in the current study have identified this cultural expectation in qualitative interviews. Further, these elders emphasized

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<sup>1</sup> A note on language: While we acknowledge that “volunteer” is a Westernized concept and we aim to move away from this language, we note that scholars currently utilize this concept (Jope, 2008; Kerr et al., 2001; Yap & Biddle, 2012). We also note that the current project used this same terminology in a measurement item. In the absence of better language, we use terms such as “community engagement,” “community involvement,” “giving back,” and “helping in the community.”

important differences in traditional Indigenous forms of economy and definitions of success, both of which are grounded in this helping mentality of an Indigenous worldview (Gonzalez et al., In Review).

We highlight the unique characteristics of cultural and community engagement and participation among Indigenous Peoples for many distinct reasons. First, we seek to answer the call for positive research on Indigenous Peoples and communities that highlights sources of strength and resilience (Kading et al., 2019). Next, we want to focus on the cultural strengths that Indigenous adolescents and early adults bring with them into community spaces (Yosso, 2005), because both communities and individuals can gain many benefits from community-engaged behaviors. For example, involvement in community activities can strengthen community cohesion, contribute to individual physical and mental well-being, and help to preserve valuable cultural and spiritual knowledge among Indigenous groups (Jope, 2008; Kerr et al., 2001; Yap & Biddle, 2012). Furthermore, highlighting Indigenous Peoples' unique experiences and knowledges is important because individuals from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups are less likely to be invited for volunteer participation and community engagement (McBride et al., 2006; Musick et al., 2000). Excluding these individuals fails to recognize their critically important talents and provides a one-sided understanding of volunteer participation. Culturally specific activities and behaviors are valid sources of volunteer participation and community engagement and are likely to lead to the same benefits—if not more benefits—as those documented from Western ideas of volunteerism.

## Literature Review

### *Western Approaches to the Study and Conceptualization of Volunteering*

Studies of “volunteering” typically define the term as freely engaging in any activity that benefits someone or something else, such as a person, organization, or cause (Wilson, 2000). Western conceptualizations of volunteer participation, however, have shaped which activities are counted and valued as volunteering (Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Emmett, 1999). Studies examining volunteer participation note that it is typically considered either formal or informal. Formal volunteer participation includes volunteering through a formal organization, such as a nonprofit organization, educational

institution, or employment venue. Informal volunteer participation involves helping friends, family members, or the larger community without a formal organizational structure (Mesch et al., 2006; Parboteeah et al., 2004).

Most existing research focuses on volunteer participation in formal organizations, with mostly White samples. Excluding people of color results in part because people from diverse racial and ethnic groups are less likely to be asked to participate in formal volunteer activities (Carson, 1999; Musick et al., 2000) and are more likely to engage in informal volunteering behavior (Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Mesch et al., 2006). Scholars have argued that it is problematic to only consider volunteerism within formal institutions because it does not accurately represent volunteer behavior among diverse racial and ethnic groups (Carson, 1999; Ganesh & Mcallum, 2009). More specifically, it not only makes invisible the work they do within their communities but also minimizes various motivations for engaging in community activities and overlooks potential differences in outcomes.

Existing studies offer a wide array of positive implications of volunteer participation. However, they generally fail to include diverse samples, thereby limiting the extent to which their findings can be generalized to other groups of people. As a result, they also fail to account for the needs of the communities in which people volunteer and the subsequent benefits of volunteer activities for the individuals and the communities served. Community advantages may be especially unique if we begin to study the benefits for individuals who give back within their own communities, a phenomenon that is also absent in current literature. The majority of existing studies that focus on racial and ethnic groups in terms of volunteering consist of the categories of White, Black, and Other (Brown & Smart, 2007; Mesch et al., 2006; Musick et al., 2000), leaving a gap in knowledge related to the diversity of racial and ethnic groups that make up North America. Of those studies that include more diverse samples, Indigenous Peoples have largely been ignored, resulting in a notable gap in the literature on volunteering and community engagement.

### *Helping Out and Giving Back in Indigenous Cultures*

Generally speaking, few studies focus on Indigenous communities and volunteer participation. It may be the case that volunteering as a Western concept does not accurately reflect the idea of giving back within Indigenous communities (Yumagulova & Handmer, 2021; Yumagulova et

al., 2019). In fact, the Indigenous communities involved in the present study are inherently collectivistic and community-oriented, and each tribal member plays a natural and critical role in the community (Kading et al., 2019). As noted by a participating community member, this community involvement comes from lived experiences and expectations modeled by older generations for younger generations, and it is especially evident in community gatherings, cultural celebrations, spiritual ceremonial gatherings, and traditional cultural activities. Accordingly, active participation in community as an assistant or apprentice is a positive attribute that allows community gatherings to function and passes leadership roles on to the next generation (Ullrich, 2019). Each of the aforementioned characteristics of Indigenous communities—such as collectivistic, community-oriented, and active community involvement—displays Indigenous Peoples’ and communities’ strengths and assets and contributes to their community cultural wealth.

We can appreciate the Indigenous community- and culture-centered approaches identified in extant literature and highlight the importance of cultural and community connectedness as an idiomatic expression of volunteering, or “helping,” in Indigenous communities (Gray & Cote, 2019; Snowshoe et al., 2017). Certainly, this is consistent with observations of resilience from Indigenous perspectives, which are grounded in strength of community, culture, and place. When considering this wider definition of volunteering, abundant literature supports the benefits of connecting or reconnecting with culture, community, and the land for resilience and strength, particularly among Indigenous adolescent populations (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Liebenberg et al., 2019; Nystad et al., 2014; Ritchie et al., 2014; Snowshoe et al., 2017; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012; Wexler, 2014). Even so, research focuses primarily on the benefits young people receive from their culture and community and less on the benefits young people receive from *contributing* to their culture and community. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity to better understand the benefits that a traditional Indigenous culture, with a natural expectation of giving back to community (Gonzalez et al., In Review), has on young people’s development, resilience, and future influences in wider society.

Additionally, we must acknowledge the long history of colonization of Indigenous Peoples, particularly from a social determinants of health

approach. Colonization places Indigenous individuals in a unique position of social, economic, and political marginalization, and the resulting challenges faced by these communities are directly linked to community involvement. Where one lives is often a determinant of health, and within Indigenous communities, colonization has created enduring challenges contributing to disproportionate rates of poverty and unemployment as well as low levels of healthcare access, funding for critical infrastructure, and educational attainment (Brockie et al., 2015; Indian Health Service, 2014; World Health Organization, n.d.). As a consequence, community engagement or volunteering can be appreciated as contributing to well-being at the community level. Moreover, community engagement within Indigenous communities may help to support cultural and community continuity and survivance and the enhancement of social capital.

The limitations of volunteering as a concept may in part be a result of the lack of studies that specifically include Indigenous individuals, which in turn has limited the culturally relevant conceptualization and operationalization of volunteering. Although Western-defined notions of volunteering as a concept may not be easily identifiable in many North American Indigenous societies, the practice of giving back to or serving one’s community and culture are necessary functions in these communities. Existing studies suggest that Indigenous Peoples view volunteering differently compared to non-Indigenous groups, often narrating a more holistic community engagement and community-centered approach. For example, Warburton and McLaughlin (2007) and Yumagulova and colleagues (2019) note limitations of current conceptualizations of volunteering that do not consider the broader ways Indigenous Peoples are often involved in their communities and highlight the lack of attention given to cultural context. More specifically, North American Indigenous communities are inherently more communal, and thus the types of and motivations for volunteering may look very different (Warburton & McLaughlin, 2007).

A growing recognition of the importance of connection and involvement for Indigenous well-being (Priest et al., 2012; Ullrich, 2019) has led scholars to examine the levels and forms that connection and involvement may take. Consequently, research on giving back in more collectivist communities needs to take a more holistic approach to measurement. For example,

although not focused on volunteer involvement, Ullrich's (2019) Indigenous Connectedness Framework incorporates multiple levels and mechanisms through which connection to culture and community manifest and contribute to both child and collective well-being. Likewise, Priest and colleagues (2012) developed a conceptual framework for childhood health and well-being among Aboriginal Peoples of Australia, positing that culture was a core piece of health and well-being and helped assert connection to community. Additionally, findings from Warburton and McLaughlin (2007) highlighted the unique ways older Indigenous individuals are active within their communities. They claimed that the activities and contributions undertaken by their study participants might differ from those of other members of society and, therefore, may go unnoticed. More recently, Yumagulova and colleagues (2019) argued that knowledge regarding "the role of volunteers for supporting community resilience efforts in Indigenous communities" (p. 2) is incomplete. Our efforts herein represent an initial step to address this concern.

## Data and Methods

The HP study is an 11-wave panel study of 735 American Indian and Canadian First Nations young people from eight Anishinaabe tribal communities near the U.S./Canadian border, spanning approximately 19 years. Families with tribally enrolled, age-eligible children living on or within 50 miles of reservation/reserve lands were invited to participate (recruitment rate = 79.4%). HP took place in two phases. Phase one (2001–2009) involved eight waves with the target participants (mean age at baseline = 11.1 years) and at least one parent or caregiver. Retention rates were high throughout the study, ranging from 96.2% at Wave 2 to 81.9% at Wave 8. Phase two began in 2016 with three additional waves with the original target participants, now young adults (mean age at Wave 9 = 26.3 years, at Wave 10 = 27.3 years). At Wave 10, 513 young adults were interviewed, representing 69.9% of the original sample. For both phases, community research councils (CRCs) were established in each location to oversee the hiring of interviewers, assist with measurement development and adaptation, and ensure that the project and publications were culturally respectful and appropriate. Data were collected via in-person interviews, and participants received a traditional cultural gift and incentive (\$40 in Phase one, \$50 in Phase two) for each interview. All interviewers

and supervisors were tribal members or spouses of members and underwent intensive annual training on data collection procedures and confidentiality. Both phases received institutional review board approval from the home universities of the primary investigators (Whitbeck et al., 2014).

Data for the current study were drawn from the later adolescent waves of Phase one (Waves 5, 7, and 8) and from Wave 10 of Phase two. The analytic sample consists of 461 participants who were interviewed at Wave 10 (when the focal dependent variables were measured) and in the latter waves of Phase one (Waves 5, 7, or 8; when prior volunteering was measured).

The current manuscript developed through multiple stages, all of which involved community members. First, members of the research team gave each community a list of topics that community members wanted to be examined in more detail. Community members chose the general topic of volunteer participation most often. Next, a CRC member joined as a coauthor of the manuscript to provide feedback throughout and contribute to the writing process. Finally, all CRC members read and provided feedback on the manuscript before it was submitted for publication. Additionally, to provide full transparency, we as authors must acknowledge that we possess different characteristics that have the potential to impact the research process. The writing team consisted of, in order of authorship, two allied scholars who are not Indigenous, one of whom has been involved with the study for 14 years, and three Indigenous scholars representing Turtle Mountain Chippewa Band in North Dakota, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, and Lac du Flambeau band of Lake Superior Ojibwe.

## Measures

**Volunteer Participation.** As we noted earlier, the use of "volunteer" in our analysis reflects terminology used in the study's survey instruments. In Phase one of HP, adolescents were asked if they had engaged in any volunteer activities in Waves 5, 7, and 8, when the adolescents were in their mid-to-late teen years. We measured *prior volunteering* during later adolescence as a binary variable (0 = *no volunteering activities*; 1 = *any volunteering activities at Waves 5, 7, or 8*). Volunteer participation was measured again at Wave 10, when the young adults were in their mid-20s. The young adults were asked if they had volunteered their time, not required by an employer or court-ordered, in the past 12 months for charity or nonprofit organizations, business,

government, helping in their community, or some other form. *Current volunteering* was measured as any volunteering activities in the past 12 months at Wave 10 (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*). We also examined the individual types of volunteering separately in our descriptive and bivariate analyses.

**Cultural and Community Involvement.** We assessed these forms of involvement using a variety of variables drawn from later adolescent and young adult waves. First, participants were asked at Wave 10 whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of attitude statements about their culture and community, two of which were relevant to the current study: “Many of the things I do are to *give back* to Anishinaabe people” and “I try to *be a role model* for other Anishinaabe people.” Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Second, traditional and spiritual activities were assessed in both phases of the HP study. Phase one included checklists of traditional activities (e.g., beaded, hunted, listened to elders tell stories) and spiritual activities (e.g., offered tobacco, attended ceremonial feasts, smudged or saged) engaged in during the past 12 months (shown in Appendix A). We measured traditional activities and spiritual activities in adolescence as the mean number of activities participated in across Waves 5, 7, and 8. In Phase two, traditional activities and current spiritual activities in early adulthood were measured as the frequency of participation in activities at Wave 10. Response categories ranged from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*every day*).

**Control Variables.** All control variables were self-reported and drawn from Wave 10 of the study. Gender was coded as a binary variable (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*). To account for proximity to reservation communities, location was coded as a binary variable as well (0 = *residing off reservation/reserve*; 1 = *residing on reservation/reserve*). Age was a continuous measure of age in years. Highest level of education was dichotomized (0 = *high school or less*; 1 = *any postsecondary education*). Employment status was assessed with a categorical variable (employed full-time, employed part-time, unemployed, student, disabled, or homemaker). For the current analysis, given the link between being employed or being in school and volunteer involvement, we created two dummy variables: currently *employed* either full- or part-time and currently a *student* (reference is unemployed, disabled, or homemaker).

### *Analytic Strategy*

Our analysis proceeded in three steps. We first examined the descriptive statistics of volunteer activities as adolescents and as young adults, including the kinds of activities and, for the young adults, the frequency of participation, and community and cultural engagement in adolescence and young adulthood. We then explored the interrelationships among volunteer, cultural, and community engagement variables using bivariate correlations, chi-square tests, and *t* tests. Finally, we used logistic regression to examine the longitudinal and concurrent associations of cultural and community engagement variables with volunteer involvement in young adulthood.

### **Results**

As shown in Table 1, approximately 40% of the adults included in the analytic sample reported engaging in some form of volunteer activities during the past year. The majority of them reported helping out in their communities (31.24%), followed by volunteering at a nonprofit or charity organization (16.92%). Among volunteers at Wave 10, the frequency of volunteering varied from only once or twice in the past year (22.03%) to daily (5.08%). About 71% of the total analytic sample had volunteered at least once in late adolescence, including all of those reporting current volunteer participation. When asked about their prior volunteer activities (at Wave 7, the only adolescent wave in which open-ended responses were solicited), responses were varied but centered on helping members within their communities. These activities included performing yardwork for elders, working on community and highway clean-ups, and assisting at food pantries and with food distribution (e.g., Meals on Wheels). A number of young people were involved in disaster preparation and recovery related to flooding. Additionally, we had the opportunity to ask a subset ( $n = 143$ ) of the young adult sample about helping others in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The young adults helped those in need by providing services such as food (77.6%), transportation (65.7%), shelter (49.3%), or sewing masks or other protective equipment (30.1%). They also aided others culturally and spiritually, such as providing traditional medicine (44%) or traditional ceremonies or cultural practices (23.9%). Notably, nearly all ( $n = 137$ , 95.8%) of the subsample reported helping others in their community in some way related to the pandemic.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (*n* = 461)

Variable	Mean/Percent	Std.	Range
Female	56.40%		
On reservation/reserve	64.64%		
Age	27.33	1.04	25–30
Any postsecondary education <sup>a</sup>	37.96%		
Employed <sup>b</sup>	54.01%		
Student <sup>b</sup>	3.90%		
Current volunteering	39.47%		
Frequency of volunteering			
Once or twice	22.03%		
At least 3–4 times	25.42%		
At least monthly	24.86%		
At least weekly	22.60%		
At least daily	5.08%		
Volunteer: Nonprofit	16.92%		
Volunteer: Business	3.90%		
Volunteer: Government	10.41%		
Volunteer: In community	31.24%		
Prior volunteering	70.93%		
Giving back to community	2.58	0.83	0–4
Being a role model	2.91	0.79	0–4
Traditional activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup>	3.21	2.51	0–12
Spiritual activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup>	2.92	2.16	0–10
Traditional activities; Early adulthood <sup>d</sup>	1.38	1.63	0–6
Spiritual activities: Early adulthood <sup>d</sup>	2.05	2.03	0–6

<sup>a</sup> Reference category is high school or less education.

<sup>b</sup> Reference category is unemployed/disabled/homemaker.

<sup>c</sup> Prior traditional activities and prior spiritual activities are measured as the average number of traditional and spiritual activities participated in at Waves 5, 7, and 8.

<sup>d</sup> Current traditional activities and current spiritual activities are measured as the frequency of participation in activities at Wave 10.

The sample had a larger proportion of female participants (56.4%) compared to male, approximately 65% of the adults lived on reservation or reserve lands, and the average age at Wave 10 was around 27 years old. Slightly more than one-third of the adults reported at least some postsecondary education, over half reported current full- or part-time employment, and less than 4% were current students. The mean number of traditional activities reported in late

adolescence was 3.21, and the mean was slightly lower for spiritual activities (2.92). In adulthood, participants reported engaging in traditional activities approximately monthly and engaging in spiritual activities slightly more often.

We next explored the associations among the study variables using bivariate correlations (Table 2). There were positive, significant correlations among volunteering and cultural activity participation both concurrently and longitudinally.

**Table 2.** Bivariate Correlations With Volunteer Status ( $n = 461$ )

	Current volunteering	Nonprofit	Business	Government	In community	Prior volunteering
Female	0.08	0.08	0.00	0.03	0.04	0.02
On reservation/ reserve	-0.05	-0.05	0.06	0.03	-0.01	0.00
Age	0.07	0.07	0.10	0.05	0.05	0.01
Any postsecondary education <sup>a</sup>	0.23***	0.28***	0.05	0.20***	0.10	0.18**
Employed <sup>b</sup>	0.09	0.09*	-0.04	0.13**	0.04	0.04
Student <sup>b</sup>	0.16***	0.15**	0.02	0.12*	0.13**	0.06
Giving back to community	0.10*	0.13**	0.04	0.17***	0.09*	-0.02
Being a role model	0.20***	0.14**	0.02	0.20***	0.15**	0.08
Traditional activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup>	0.14**	0.10*	0.00	0.11*	0.15**	0.24***
Spiritual activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup>	0.16***	0.10*	0.02	0.09*	0.14**	0.19***
Traditional activities: Early adulthood <sup>d</sup>	0.19***	0.13**	0.08	0.11*	0.20***	0.10*
Spiritual activities: Early adulthood <sup>d</sup>	0.29**	0.24**	0.11*	0.23***	0.22***	0.20***

<sup>a</sup> Reference category is high school or less education.

<sup>b</sup> Reference category is unemployed/disabled/homemaker.

<sup>c</sup> Adolescent traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the average number of activities participated in at Waves 5, 7, and 8.

<sup>d</sup> Adult traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the frequency of participation in activities at Wave 10.

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$

That is, volunteer participation was correlated with traditional and spiritual activity participation within and across both time periods. Regarding the types of volunteering in early adulthood, all but volunteering in business were positively related to giving back to the community and to being a role model, as well as to early adulthood participation in traditional and spiritual activities. Gender, location, and age were unrelated to either current or prior volunteering. Participants with any postsecondary experience were more likely to be current volunteers, to volunteer with nonprofit organizations, and to volunteer in local government, as were those who reported being a student as their current employment status. Being employed was positively correlated with nonprofit and government volunteer involvement. The lack of associations with business volunteering could be due to the very small number of adults who reported that type of volunteering ( $n = 18$ ).

To further explore the connections of community and cultural engagement with volunteer participation, we conducted concurrent and longitudinal  $t$  tests (Table 3). As suggested with the bivariate associations, giving back to the community or being a role model in early adulthood did not differ by prior volunteer status, but current volunteers were significantly more likely to hold those attitudes. Also similar to the bivariate correlations, traditional and spiritual activities were higher among those who reported volunteering.

Those who volunteered in later adolescence reported participating in an average of 3.59 traditional activities and 3.18 spiritual activities in later adolescence, compared to nonvolunteers, who reported 2.29 activities of either type. In addition to overall differences in cultural and spiritual activities, larger proportions of prior volunteers were involved in specific activities. For example, as shown in Table 4, compared to those without a volunteer history, significantly larger proportions of those who volunteered in adolescence participated in beading, made pow-wow regalia, made blankets, collected birch bark, went net fishing, trapped game, collected herbs or medicine, went to ceremonial feasts or a traditional healer, sought advice from a spiritual advisor, attended a ceremonial funeral, or been taught ceremonial songs. Further, adolescent cultural activities were higher on average for adult volunteers (Table 3). Adult volunteers reported an average of 3.65 traditional activities ( $p < .01$ ) and 3.34 spiritual activities ( $p < .01$ ) in later adolescence, compared to 2.93 traditional and 2.65 spiritual activities among adult nonvolunteers. There is also evidence that adult engagement in cultural activities was higher among adolescent volunteers: On average, adolescent volunteers reported significantly more frequent participation in both traditional (1.48 versus 1.12,  $p < .05$ ) and spiritual (2.31 versus 1.43,  $p < .001$ ) activities in adulthood.

We next examined the interrelationships between volunteer participation and cultural

**Table 3.** Mean Comparisons of Cultural and Community Engagement by Volunteering Status ( $n = 461$ )

	Volunteering			
	No prior	Prior	No current	Current
Giving back to community	2.60	2.57	2.51	2.68*
Being a role model	2.82	2.94	2.78	3.11***
Traditional activities: Adolescence <sup>a</sup>	2.29	3.59***	2.93	3.65**
Spiritual activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup>	2.29	3.18***	2.65	3.34**
Traditional activities: Early adulthood <sup>b</sup>	1.12	1.48*	1.12	1.77***
Spiritual activities: Early adulthood <sup>b</sup>	1.43	2.31***	1.58	2.77***

<sup>a</sup> Adolescent traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the average number of activities participated in at Waves 5, 7, and 8.

<sup>b</sup> Adult traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the frequency of participation in activities at Wave 10.

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$



**Table 4.** Logistic Regression of Volunteer Participation ( $n = 461$ )

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>
<b>Female</b>	0.20	1.23	0.17	1.18	0.34	1.40	0.13	1.14
	[0.20]		[0.21]		[0.22]		[0.22]	
<b>On reservation/ reserve</b>	0.03	1.03	0.09	1.09	-0.02	0.98	0.10	1.10
	[0.21]		[0.22]		[0.23]		[0.23]	
<b>Age</b>	0.19*	1.21	0.19	1.21	0.22*	1.24	0.14	1.15
	[0.10]		[0.10]		[0.10]		[0.10]	
<b>Any postsecondary education <sup>a</sup></b>	0.82***	2.28	0.74***	2.10	0.74***	2.09	0.80***	2.22
	[0.21]		[0.21]		[0.22]		[0.22]	
<b>Employed <sup>b</sup></b>	0.38	1.47	0.37	1.45	0.4	1.49	0.47*	1.60
	[0.21]		[0.21]		[0.22]		[0.22]	
<b>Student <sup>b</sup></b>	1.80**	6.03	1.72**	5.56	1.63**	5.12	1.53*	4.63
	[0.61]		[0.62]		[0.63]		[0.66]	
<b>Giving back to community</b>			0.04	1.04	-0.06	0.94	-0.12	0.89
			[0.14]		[0.14]		[0.15]	
<b>Being a role model</b>			0.44**	1.55	0.41*	1.50	0.37*	1.45
			[0.16]		[0.16]		[0.16]	
<b>Traditional activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup></b>					0.20**	1.22		
					[0.07]			
<b>Traditional activities: Early adulthood <sup>d</sup></b>					0.10*	1.11		
					[0.04]			
<b>Spiritual activities: Adolescence <sup>c</sup></b>							0.25***	1.28
							[0.06]	
<b>Spiritual activities: Early adulthood <sup>d</sup></b>							0.12*	1.13
							[0.05]	
<b>Constant</b>	-6.47*	0.00	-7.80**	0.00	-8.82**	0.00	-6.73*	0.00
	[2.69]		[2.75]		[2.81]		[2.82]	

Note: Standard errors in brackets.

<sup>a</sup> Reference category is high school or less education.

<sup>b</sup> Reference category is unemployed/disabled/homemaker.

<sup>c</sup> Adolescent traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the average number of activities participated in at Waves 5, 7, and 8.

<sup>d</sup> Adult traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the frequency of participation in activities at Wave 10.

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$

involvement after adjusting for control variables, utilizing logistic regression with volunteering at Wave 10 as the dependent variable (Table 5). Control variables were entered first (Model 1), followed by community involvement (Model 2), and involvement in traditional activities (Model 3) and spiritual activities (Model 4). In the first model, age was positively related to volunteer involvement ( $O.R. = 1.21, p < .05$ ). Having any postsecondary education doubled the odds of volunteering ( $O.R. = 2.28, p < .001$ ) compared to having less education, and being a current student increased the odds of volunteering six-fold ( $O.R. = 6.03, p < .01$ ) compared to the reference category (i.e., being unemployed, disabled, or a homemaker). Being currently employed was unrelated to volunteer status, as were gender and living on reservation/reserve lands.

Community involvement variables were added in Model 2. Agreeing with the statement that many of the things I do are to give back to Anishinaabe people was unrelated to volunteer involvement, but agreeing with the statement that I want to be a role model for other Anishinaabe people increased the odds of volunteering by

55% ( $O.R. = 1.55, p < .01$ ). In Model 3, a unit increase in the frequency of participating in traditional activities in adolescence was associated with 11% higher odds of volunteering ( $O.R. = 1.11, p < .05$ ), and a unit increase in the mean number of traditional activities in adulthood increased the odds of volunteering by 22% ( $O.R. = 1.22, p < .01$ ), holding all else constant. Being a role model remained significantly associated with volunteering. The effects of education and current student status were reduced somewhat but remained significant. Spiritual activities were entered in Model 4, and the results were largely similar to those involving traditional activities. Participating in spiritual activities in adolescence increased the odds of volunteering in adulthood by 13% ( $O.R. = 1.13, p < .05$ ) after also accounting for the positive and significant association between adult spiritual participation and volunteering ( $O.R. = 1.28, p < .001$ ). Being a role model continued to be significant but was reduced slightly in magnitude from Model 2 ( $O.R. = 1.45, p < .05$ ).

We conducted supplementary analyses to explore the associations between the cultural and community variables and types of volunteering in

**Table 5.** Logistic Regression of Types of Volunteer Participation ( $n = 461$ )

	Nonprofit		Government		In community	
	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>OR</i>
Giving back to community	0.15	1.16	0.34	1.41	-0.08	0.92
	[0.19]		[0.24]		[0.15]	
Being a role model	0.28	1.32	0.71*	2.04	0.34*	1.41
	[0.20]		[0.28]		[0.16]	
Traditional activities: Early adulthood <sup>a</sup>	0.01	1.01	-0.06	0.94	0.16*	1.17
	[0.08]		[0.10]		[0.07]	
Spiritual activities: Early adulthood <sup>a</sup>	0.26***	1.30	0.29***	1.33	0.15**	1.16
	[0.07]		[0.08]		[0.06]	
Constant	-3.47***	0.03	-5.99***	0.00	-2.15***	0.12
	[0.61]		[0.90]		[0.46]	

Note: Standard errors in brackets.

<sup>a</sup> Adult traditional activities and spiritual activities are measured as the frequency of participation in activities at Wave 10.

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$

early adulthood (Appendix A), excluding business volunteering due to the very small number of participants reporting that form of volunteer activity. Because of smaller cell sizes among the volunteer types, we did not include the control variables to preserve statistical power (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000; Peduzzi et al., 1996). Giving back to the community was not associated with any type of volunteering, controlling for being a role model and adult cultural and spiritual activity involvement. Being a role model was associated with higher odds of government volunteering ( $O.R. = 2.04, p < .05$ ) and volunteering in the community ( $O.R. = 1.41, p < .05$ ). Early adult traditional activity frequency was associated only with volunteering in the community ( $O.R. = 1.17, p < .05$ ), but spiritual activity frequency was positively associated with all three types of volunteering.

## Discussion

Volunteer participation is commonly measured and conceptualized through Western, Eurocentric ideas and excludes the wide variety of ways individuals are involved within their communities, especially how community involvement manifests in more diverse communities. This is particularly true among our sample of Anishinaabe young adults, who described numerous ways they give back to their communities. Thus, we conceptualized the idea of community involvement and giving back to be more inclusive of both formal volunteer activities within institutions and organizations, as well as other community and cultural contributions. This conceptualization more holistically describes the different means of engagement in the reservation and reserve communities of the HP study and could apply to other Indigenous groups that are also intrinsically communal. Furthermore, highlighting the unique ways Indigenous Peoples are involved in their communities emphasizes the strengths, knowledges, and cultural wealth within those communities and demonstrates what Indigenous Peoples bring with them to other spaces.

Our findings demonstrated that Indigenous young people in the HP study have been involved in many different capacities within their communities, both as adolescents and young adults. Their various acts of service and giving back are essential elements of their culture and communities. Using narrow, predefined questions about volunteer involvement, we nonetheless found that the majority of our sample (70%) of young adults (mean age = 27.33 years) had volunteered at least once as adolescents, and 38% had engaged in some form of volunteer

participation as young adults, the majority of whom reported they volunteered by helping in their community. If the survey instrument had allowed the young adults to define “volunteering” or “community involvement” for themselves, we may have found current involvement to be greater and more inclusive of a larger variety of activities. For example, a large majority of the subsample of young adults in our COVID-19 supplemental survey said they contributed in numerous ways, including sewing masks; providing transportation, food, or childcare; and providing traditional medicine, ceremonies, or practices for those within the community. Our findings here mirror other studies that have examined informal volunteering. For example, Finklestein (2011) found that being more collectivist (i.e. such as the communities included in our study) was more strongly related to informal volunteering.

Similar to existing research (Birdwell et al., 2013; Duke et al., 2009), our results also show sustained community engagement throughout the life course. For example, all current volunteers had a history of volunteering, regardless of their reasons for volunteering in adolescence (required by school, ordered by court, encouraged by family, etc.). This indicates that if community involvement is encouraged and supported among adolescents, those same behaviors carry over into adulthood. Sustained involvement can then benefit individuals and communities’ long term (Lerner et al., 2005). We also found significant, concurrent, and longitudinal correlations between volunteer and cultural involvement, again demonstrating continuity over time and, more specifically, the interrelationships between community involvement and cultural activities. Furthermore, those who reported being volunteers were significantly more involved in traditional and spiritual activities than nonvolunteers, signaling the myriad ways in which HP participants were active within their communities.

More specifically, we found that volunteer participation was related to traditional and spiritual activities in late adolescence and early adulthood. For example, those who participated in volunteer activities engaged in more traditional and spiritual activities on average. Additionally, those with a history of volunteer participation had greater participation in various traditional and spiritual activities. This increased participation was sustained in adolescence and through early adulthood, indicating the holistic ways in which our sample was more broadly involved within

their communities. Relatedly, wanting to be a role model was consistently associated with volunteer participation, demonstrating how giving back is considered in a more collectivist, holistic manner. This once again demonstrates the various aspects of cultural wealth within the HP communities.

In terms of sample characteristics, we found that those with higher levels of education and those who were current students greatly increased the odds of volunteering. This is a common finding across volunteer studies (Creaven et al., 2018; Detollenaere et al., 2017; Forbes & Zampelli, 2014), which is not surprising, considering the increased importance of these activities to schools and employers (Hustinx et al., 2010). Employment, gender, location, and age were not related to volunteer participation. This lack of significance could be related to limitations of current conceptualizations of volunteering, because other studies do indicate that volunteer participation varies in terms of employment (Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Creaven et al., 2018) and gender (Barber et al., 2013; Forbes & Zampelli, 2014). Further, involvement in traditional cultural activities is gendered (Whitbeck et al., 2014); a more holistic definition of giving back and community engagement may uncover gendered patterns of involvement.

Studies examining volunteer participation typically include a measure related to physical and mental health. These studies suggest that volunteer participation is positively related to physical and mental well-being (Ali et al., 2016; Creaven et al., 2018; Hernantes et al., 2019). Although not included here (available upon request) we conducted analyses on measures of self-reported physical and mental well-being with volunteer participation to determine if similar outcomes were present among our unique sample. Findings from these analyses indicated that physical and mental well-being were not associated with volunteer participation. However, further analyses showed that flourishing, a positive mental health measure, was positively associated with both giving back and being a role model, frequency of traditional and spiritual activities, and all of our self-rated health indicators. These findings support the current limitations of the dominant conceptualization of volunteer participation. For example, the term “volunteering” is not typically used in Anishinaabe because notions of giving back and being of service are so deeply engrained that only a rare person (notably, someone primed for résumé building) would use it.

Overall, our findings suggest that volunteering may be understood from an Indigenous perspective as being a “good relative” or living in a “good way,” which means accepting one’s role as a person in society to be respectful and responsible (Kading et al., 2019). Thus, recognizing volunteering not from a Western perspective but through a decolonizing lens may be more akin to community connectedness and mutual aid in collectivistic communities. Despite the paucity of literature on volunteering within Indigenous communities, it may be the case that, conceptually, volunteering places one as a bystander or outsider, whereas Indigenous community values prioritize relationship in community. The prospect of any Indigenous concept of volunteering may also be conflicted by the ongoing legacy of colonization, where every act within Indigenous communities is, by virtue, an act of survivance, an act of reclamation and, most importantly, an act of continuity. Such recognition can be seen in discourse related to language revitalization, adaptation and mitigation of climate change within Indigenous communities (Henne-Ochoa et al., 2020), and frameworks of community connectedness and well-being within Indigenous youth (Ullrich, 2019). When nurtured in adolescence, this innate Indigenous mindset of giving back, caring for others, and contributing to community may resonate into the wider society as Indigenous young adults enter schools and careers. In addition, nurturing these values in young people preserves this giving back mindset for the benefit of the land and future generations, highlighting important strengths and assets that Indigenous Peoples and communities possess. Once again, these are critically important characteristics that Indigenous Peoples bring with them to other communal spaces.

As our results demonstrate, Indigenous Peoples engage in a wide variety of behaviors that give back and contribute to the well-being of their communities, freely donating their time and energy to benefit someone or something else. This provides direct evidence for expanding the concept of volunteering and volunteer participation. We encourage scholars to critically examine how they measure and conceptualize volunteer participation to more accurately reflect the wide range of behaviors that individuals may perform. Furthermore, as volunteering is valued among schools, institutions of higher learning, and employers (Hustinx et al., 2010), we urge these entities to broaden the types of activities considered under volunteer participation to be

more inclusive of the ways young people from diverse cultural backgrounds are engaged within their communities.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

To fully contextualize our study, we must consider a few limitations. First, inquiring about volunteer participation in our study largely consisted of a predefined, closed-ended survey question. Therefore, we did not ask the young adults to define “volunteering” and thus likely did not adequately capture the numbers of young adults engaging in volunteer behaviors or the full breadth of forms of volunteering. Although the current study sought to broaden the ways volunteer participation is conceptualized and measured, there were weaknesses in the measurement we utilized. Future studies should work to incorporate more qualitative data to better capture a wider narrative of what volunteer participation, giving back, and cultural and community involvement mean within Indigenous communities.

We must also consider our use of the measurement of traditional and spiritual activities to capture one’s contribution to community. Participating in traditional and spiritual activities may not be synonymous with volunteering, especially if we consider the effects colonization has had on one’s confidence in cultural engagement behaviors (Gonzalez et al., 2022). One may apprehensively enter a community space to participate but not feel confident in stepping into helping roles, such as cooking, cleaning, passing out tobacco, making plates for elders, etc. This study indicates that some individuals may have participated in these activities without engaging in behaviors considered to be giving back; however, we do not disqualify the protective benefits of various levels of engagement. Cultural and community engagement may be a layered phenomenon including but not limited to one’s confidence in showing up, one’s confidence in helping, one’s confidence in becoming an apprentice, and so on. In this study, we only asked, in adolescence, about the different activities individuals participated in and, in early adulthood, the frequency of participation. Therefore, we did not collect data on the role of the individual within these activities. It may be enlightening to understand how these various levels of community and cultural engagement affect Indigenous adolescent and young adult development, job preparedness, and future contributions to society.

#### **Conclusion**

Volunteer participation and cultural and community engagement include a wide variety of activities that prompt well-being in individuals and communities. However, the current Westernized concept of volunteering is limited because it does not consider the many ways people can be engaged within diverse cultural groups, including Indigenous Peoples. This is problematic because it can erase or make invisible Indigenous Peoples’ unique skills, knowledges, and contributions within their own communities and wider society.

Freely giving time to benefit others is a common practice within the Anishinaabe communities in the current study. Therefore, these activities take place in many forms within various locations. Cultural and community involvement not only aids in strengthening communities but also displays the many strengths that communities have within them. It is critical to broaden the ways in which giving back and cultural and community engagement are conceptualized and measured to better appreciate the uniqueness and strengths of Indigenous Peoples and the many ways these individuals are involved in their communities. This acknowledgment is essential to make visible the contributions Indigenous Peoples provide to their own communities and the reciprocal benefits of engagement for young people and their communities. Utilizing a strengths-based lens not only highlights the many assets within Indigenous communities but also encourages scholars to take more expansive approaches to engagement and giving back.

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**Appendix A.** Comparing Traditional and Spiritual Activity Prevalence by Volunteer Status, WAVES 5-7-8

<b>Prior volunteering</b>		
	<b>None</b>	<b>Any</b>
<b>Mean # prior traditional activities</b>	2.29	3.59***
Beading	47.01%	63.30%**
Ricing	11.94%	19.27%
Spear fishing	30.60%	40.67%*
Made pow-wow regalia	17.16%	31.80%**
Collected maple sugar	18.66%	28.13%*
Picked berries	38.81%	64.83%***
Hunted	53.73%	63.00%
Played Anishinaabe games	18.66%	37.73***
Made blankets	13.43%	25.38%**
Collected birch bark	21.64%	33.03%*
Gathered ka-nik-a-nik	4.51%	8.62%
Cured/tanned hides	6.72%	11.31%
Net fished	16.42%	25.99%*
Listened to elders tell stories	61.94%	75.54%**
Snared rabbits	7.46%	13.46%
Trapped	10.45%	24.77%**
Collected herbs or medicine	10.45%	20.80%*
Made birch bark canoe	2.99%	13.15%**
Made ricing knocking sticks	11.19%	21.10%*
<b>Mean # prior spiritual activities</b>	2.29	3.18***
Offered tobacco	70.15%	79.20%*
Participated in a sweat	26.87%	31.19%
Went to ceremonial feasts	57.46%	69.11%*
Participated in ceremonial dance	17.91%	26.07%
Went to traditional healer	9.70%	19.27%*
Sought advice from spiritual advisor	14.93%	30.89%**
Used traditional medicine	27.61%	36.81%
Smudged or saged	79.10%	80.73%
Attended ceremonial funeral	50.00%	69.11%***
Participated in Sundance ceremony	0.75%	4.89%
Participated in drum group	12.69%	22.32%*
Was taught ceremonial songs	10.45%	26.61%***
Experienced puberty fast/feast	2.99%	7.34%
*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$		