BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: ENHANCING CAREER CLARITY AND PREPAREDNESS THROUGH VOLUNTEER PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL GROUP FACILITATION FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a volunteer community outreach program focused on the skill development of a group of 28 undergraduate students majoring in behavioral health disciplines at a private four-year university in the American Southwest. Participants co-facilitated psycho-education groups at a local high school for eight weeks, following pre-facilitation training and weekly processing group attendance. To evaluate the program's effectiveness, researchers used a mixed-method pretest and posttest within-groups design with a researcher-developed Likert assessment to measure perceived levels of career clarity and preparedness. The results showed significant increases in feelings of career clarity, preparedness, and confidence both during and after the student volunteer experience. These findings suggest that undergraduate universities could benefit from offering similar volunteer field experiences to students studying social sciences, whether they have formal field experience program components, to improve career clarity and preparedness for college students prior to graduation.

Keywords: *Career preparedness, career clarity, field experience, behavioral health, psychology, psycho-educational groups, undergraduate students.*

INTRODUCTION

Many universities are adopting a model of higher educational programs that aim to support employability and professional identity development. This comes in response to the increasing pressure on higher educational institutions to produce graduates with job-specific skills, as employer expectations of college graduates are continuously growing. To meet this demand, universities must provide students with opportunities to develop their skills and stand out in a competitive job market. It is no longer enough to simply have a degree; students must gain real-life experiences outside the classroom to better prepare for their future careers. Research conducted by Suvedi et al. (2016) revealed that undergraduate experiences that provide students with support and supervision for skill development significantly impact shaping their worldviews, improving communication abilities, and clarifying career paths. These outcomes can be found through service-learning, co-curricular, or volunteer experiences identified as high-impact practices by the Association

of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2007). High-impact practices are defined as those experiences that help undergraduates develop real-world skills through hands-on applied learning (Martini et al., 2019). To date, however, there are few studies that explore the correlation between these high-impact practices and feelings of career clarity and preparedness (Martini et al., 2019).

CAREER CONSTRUCTION, CLARITY, AND PREPARATION

Choosing the right career is crucial because it can significantly impact one's job satisfaction, financial stability, and overall happiness. A career that aligns with an individual's interests, values, and strengths can lead to a fulfilling and successful professional life (Chen et al., 2023). Career Construction Theory (CCT) is a comprehensive and dynamic approach to career choice and development that emphasizes the importance of one's life story and personal meaning-making in career decision-making and career development (Savickas, 2019). The theory was developed by Savickas in the 1990s and has been refined over time. According to CCT, individuals construct their career through a process of self-reflection, exploration, and action. This process is influenced by various factors, including one's personality, interests, values, and life experiences (Savickas, 2019). Rudolph et al. (2019) argues that CCT is particularly relevant in today's world, where individuals are increasingly expected to navigate complex and changing career paths. Guichard et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of career adaptability in CCT, which refers to an individual's ability to effectively manage career transitions and changes over the course of their career.

Career clarity is closely linked to CCT. According to CCT, individuals construct their careers through a process of self-reflection, exploration, and action. Career clarity involves having a clear understanding of one's skills, interests, values, and career goals, which is essential for effective career decision-making and career planning. Therefore, career clarity plays a crucial role in the career construction process, as it helps individuals align their career choices with their personal aspirations and goals. Career clarity is positively correlated with career success and satisfaction, and it is developed through gaining knowledge about different industries, observing role models, and hashing

out career-related values (Xin et al., 2020). While some undergraduate students find their career path in college, many struggle to understand what they want to do after graduation, particularly psychology students (Strapp et al., 2018). Graduate education is common for psychology students (Lin et al., 2017), which can extend the time to achieve higher career clarity and build social capital with professionals (Mason et al., 2022). However, students often have difficulty connecting their education and social capital to their desired careers (Carmo, 2017; Toscher, 2020). Career preparedness, including communication and critical thinking skills, is essential for career success and is developed through participation in career-specific courses and activities (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022; Raby & Wilde, 2021). Engagement in co-curricular activities also benefits self-efficacy, institutional support, student retention, academic achievement, understanding of others, and practical skill development (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Experiential learning, such as internships, service learning, or structured volunteering supported by faculty and discipline-specific professionals, is important for developing new skills and preparing students for careers in mental health fields (Slaughter & Hoefer, 2019).

Boyer's (1996) goals of application model plays a crucial role in shaping an impactful learning experience for student volunteers. By integrating theory with practice, this model of engagement empowers students to translate their knowledge into practical skills, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities within a student's chosen discipline. Through volunteer opportunities, students can actively apply their classroom learning to real-world scenarios, working alongside professionals to support individuals facing behavioral health challenges. This hands-on involvement not only enhances their technical proficiency but also cultivates empathy, cultural sensitivity, and problem-solving abilities. As students engage in direct service and community outreach, they contribute to the betterment of society while developing their own professional identity, aligning their aspirations with the overarching goal of promoting well-being.

CAREER CLARITY AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

There is a link between volunteering and career clarity, as volunteering can provide individuals

with valuable opportunities to explore their interests, values, and skills in a real-world context (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021). Volunteering allows individuals to gain new experiences, knowledge, and skills that can help them develop a clearer understanding of their career goals and aspirations. Research conducted by De Witte et al. (2020) found that volunteering can also enhance individuals' career adaptability, which refers to their ability to effectively manage career transitions and changes. Through volunteering, individuals can gain exposure to different career fields and develop new skills that can be transferable to different jobs. Additionally, volunteering can provide individuals with a sense of purpose and fulfillment, which can be important for career satisfaction and well-being. By volunteering, individuals can also build their professional network and connect with individuals who can offer guidance and support in their career development.

Volunteering can significantly impact career pathways and employability capital, which is especially important for those who lack a preexisting professional network or field experience (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021). Borwein (2014) suggested that community-based volunteer experiences may be seen as important for entry-level positions at a time when less than 25% of employers are willing to consider job applicants with no related experience. External career-related opportunities, such as field education experiences and co-curricular activities, enhance career preparedness in social work fields (Beddoe et al., 2018; Martini et al., 2019). Students with hands-on experience are better equipped to identify their desired future roles, positively affecting their motivation, willingness, and performance (Inceoglu et al., 2019). Moreover, the "learning by doing" approach helps prepare students to solve real-world problems collaboratively and reflect critically on their professional performance (Bourque & Bourdon, 2017). Hands-on experiences are particularly beneficial for social sciences students, enhancing active learning and cultural compliance (Dunn, 2015; Earnest et al., 2016). While some behavioral health academic disciplines require field education, many undergraduate psychology programs lack hands-on skill development opportunities, resulting in passive learning (Dunn, 2015). To address this need, the current initiative provided undergraduate students in psychology, sociology, counseling, and behavioral health programs with a volunteer opportunity to co-facilitate psycho-educational groups at a local high school. These short, structured groups focused on providing education through information-sharing and coping mechanisms, preparing students for future group dynamics (Brown, 2018). Acai et al. (2013) support experiential learning as a gateway to gaining a clearer idea of career direction as well as becoming more competitive in the job market following graduation than students who have not yet worked in their field of study.

INITIATIVE BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

The present study investigated how a more altruistic form of experiential learning through volunteer field experience can impact undergraduate university students' career clarity and preparedness. This endeavor unfolded through a partnership between the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at a private university located in the Southwestern United States and a local public high school. The collaboration centered on providing psycho-educational groups for underserved high school students and addressing logistical factors, including project scope, ethical considerations, faculty support from the university, time commitments, and the psycho-educational requirements of high school students. After a collaborative meeting involving representatives from both the university and high school administrations and program faculty, this initiative was formally established as an ongoing program conducted each semester.

The program provided college students with practical skill development opportunities relevant to their potential careers while also benefiting high school students through undergraduate student volunteer facilitation of psychoeducational support groups. To prepare undergraduates for employment, full-time faculty collaborated with the local high school, offering sophomore, junior, and senior psychology, sociology, counseling, and behavioral health science students the chance to co-facilitate psychoeducational groups tailored to high school students' needs. Faculty provided ongoing support in weekly process groups where volunteers reflected on experiences, applied course content, and planned for future sessions. Additionally, the program aligned with the university's mission of community outreach and revitalization, addressing

undergraduates' career development needs. It was hypothesized that undergraduate student volunteers participating in this program would gain career clarity and feel more prepared for their future careers following their experience in the program.

METHODS

To assess the influence of the initiative on college student volunteers' perceptions of career clarity and preparedness, a mixed-method pretest and posttest within-groups design was employed. The assessment utilized a Likert scale developed by the researchers. This study adhered to ethical standards and informed consent procedures, prioritizing human welfare. Site authorization for the study was granted, and all Internal Review Board guidelines were duly met.

PARTICIPANTS

The study participants comprised 28 undergraduate students attending an on-campus private Christian university situated in the southwestern region of the United States. The age range of the participants fell between 18 and 22 years. The sample encompassed four male participants and a predominantly female participant group. The participants' academic standing exhibited diversity, with ten juniors, ten seniors, and six sophomores represented. Furthermore, the majority of the participants self-identified as Christian, and a significant proportion of them were pursuing degrees in counseling and psychology.

DATA COLLECTION

The primary researchers were full-time faculty members who were routinely involved in facilitating the initiative. During one of their regularly scheduled 300-400 level class periods during the first week of class, faculty members provided a brief, scripted verbal overview of the volunteer opportunity before passing out an Initiative Interest Form. The scripted interview was the same content located on the form, aimed to control for standardization of verbiage and message between faculty members. Students were informed that limited spots were available, that there was no guarantee of selection, and that only committed students should fill out the application paperwork.

The application form provided an overview of the initiative, the volunteer commitment of 30 hours, the need for attendance in a weekly faculty-led process group, and the co-facilitation of high school groups. It also collected the student's name, email, academic major, and schedule shared with the Project Coordinator. Out of 47 applicants from relevant majors, 35 were selected based on their commitment to volunteer, attend training and processing groups, and co-facilitate all high school sessions, with their schedules aligned with the program's needs. The Project Coordinator, chosen for their credentials, conducted interviews with eligible students who had no schedule conflicts.

INTERVIEW AND SELECTION PROCESS

The Project Coordinator interviewed eligible applicants without scheduling conflicts to assess their interest and motivation in facilitating high school groups, commitment to follow through, and clarify any scheduling issues. The interviewer asked nine questions, outlined in Appendix A, and manually recorded responses. The Project Coordinator and four full-time faculty members reviewed all applicants and selected 35 candidates (8-9 from each of the four disciplines) for the initiative. Selected students received an email with important instructions, start dates, and updates. Overflow students were placed on a list for future consideration.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was provided to students who agreed to participate in the research portion of the initiative. This included details surrounding components of the interview process prior to its occurrence and an explanation of how participants' identities and experiences would be protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

STUDENT ORIENTATION

Selected candidates were notified via phone or email and required to attend an initial orientation meeting where they received logistical instructions, including pre-group training and steps on the high-school side (e.g., fingerprint clearance). They signed a Participation Agreement form that attested to confidentiality and agreement to fulfill all project requirements. Data for the pretest aspect of the research project was collected during the orientation.

MEASURES

Data were collected before and after the eight-week initiative, and the pre-and-post assessment questionnaires can be found in Appendix B. Prior

to the start of the initiative, 28 students completed a demographic questionnaire and a pre-group facilitation research questionnaire with nine questions. These questions assessed their preparedness for their chosen career and how group facilitation could help them, and they also included an open-ended question. Responses were coded, and qualitative information was extracted and coded for themes using a password-protected Excel spreadsheet. The same process was repeated for the post-test measure. The detailed questions and responses can be found in the results section.

EIGHT-WEEK PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE: STEPS AND OVERVIEW

Step 1: Pre-Initiative Training Modules and Requirements

- University student volunteers participate in training modules with faculty.

- Training topics include ethics, cultural competence, group dynamics, and facilitation.

- Important tasks completed with high school personnel, including district training and fingerprint clearance.

Step 2: Psychoeducational Groups

- University students conduct eight weeks of one-hour psychoeducational groups in designated high school classrooms.

- Groups formed based on high school student needs, including parental, teacher, and/or peer conflict, academic struggles, social skills, and grief and loss.

- University volunteers collaborate on group content based on group needs, life skills, and providing a safe place for discussion.

Step 3: Weekly Processing Meetings

- University faculty facilitate weekly processing meetings with university students.

- Meetings provide a forum for discussion of group experience and planning for future facilitation.

- Topics include managing difficult personalities, conflict, and alternative methods for facilitation.

Step 4: Post-Initiative Data Collection

- University volunteers complete post-initiative assessment, including the same pre-initiative questions and additional open-ended questions (See Appendix B)

- Post-assessment examines the role of pre-training and weekly processing meetings.

- Responses coded and qualitative information extracted for themes.

RESULTS

Findings from both the pre and post-tests supported the researchers' original hypothesis, showing students reported higher levels of career clarity. Results from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses are detailed below, beginning with the quantitative analysis.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were gathered through pre- and post-assessments of 28 student volunteers. For data analysis, we employed SPSS statistics software to gather quantitative data from both the pre- and post-assessments. We omitted data from the four students who withdrew from the program and did not complete the post-questionnaire. Subsequently, a paired-sample t-test was employed to ascertain the presence of a significant mean difference in the career clarity responses, as measured for each question on both assessments. The outcomes of these analyses are condensed, highlighting the questions primarily concentrated on career clarity and preparedness.

Question: Career clarity

Respondents (N=28) were questioned about their present levels of clarity regarding their future career path or profession. Paired-t-test results revealed a significant mean difference between pre-assessment (M=3, SD=0.8) and post-assessment (M=3.4, SD=0.7), t(20)=2.4, p=.029. Initially, 25% of the students were either "unsure" or "somewhat sure" about their career path. In the post-assessment, no student marked "unsure," but the number of students who were "somewhat unsure" increased by 15.4%. The number of students who were "clear" remained at 46.2%, while the number of students who were "very clear" increased by 8%. While some students felt clearer about their future career path after completing the program, many students' clarity levels remained the same.

See Figures 1 and 2 for pre- and post-graphical views

of the mean differences for the first question.

Figures 1 (left) and 2 (right).

"I feel clear about my future career path or profession."
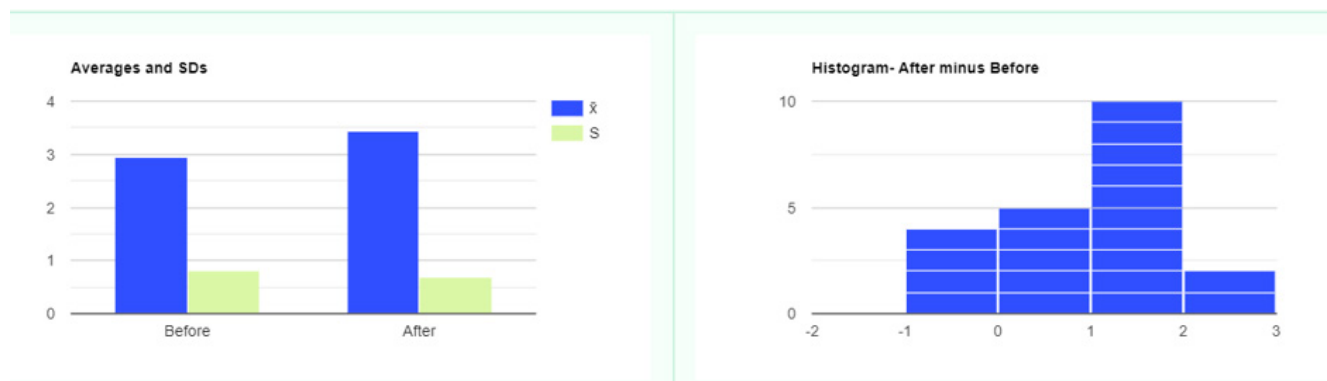
Question: Future career preparation

Respondents (N=28) were asked to rate whether their volunteer experience would impact their preparedness for their future careers. The paired-t-test results showed a significant difference between their ratings before (M=3.2, SD=0.7) and after (M=3.6, SD=0.5) facilitating psychoeducational groups,

$t(19)=2.4$, $p=.025$. On the pretest, 12 (92.3%) students reported that the volunteer experience would prepare them for their future careers, but this number decreased by 22% on the post-test. Refer to Figures 3 and 4 for visual representations of the mean differences for the third question.

Figures 3 (left) and 4 (right)

**"I feel that facilitating groups will prepare me for my future career (e.g., practice)."**

Question: Purpose/Misson Alignment

Respondents (N=28) rated their confidence in doing work that aligned with their life purpose or mission. Results of the paired-t-test showed a significant difference between the responses before facilitating psychoeducational groups (M=3.2, SD=0.8) and after facilitating groups (M=3.8, SD=0.4), $t(19)=3$, $p=.007$. The experience led to a 30.8% increase in

overall student confidence that they were engaged in meaningful work and on a career path aligned with their authentic Self. However, two students reported a decrease in confidence that their work aligned with their life purpose and mission, which is contrary to the overall trend of the results. See Figures 5 and 6 for before and after graphical views of the mean differences for the fourth question.

Figures 5 (left) and 6 (right).

"I feel confident that I am doing work that aligns with my life purpose or mission."
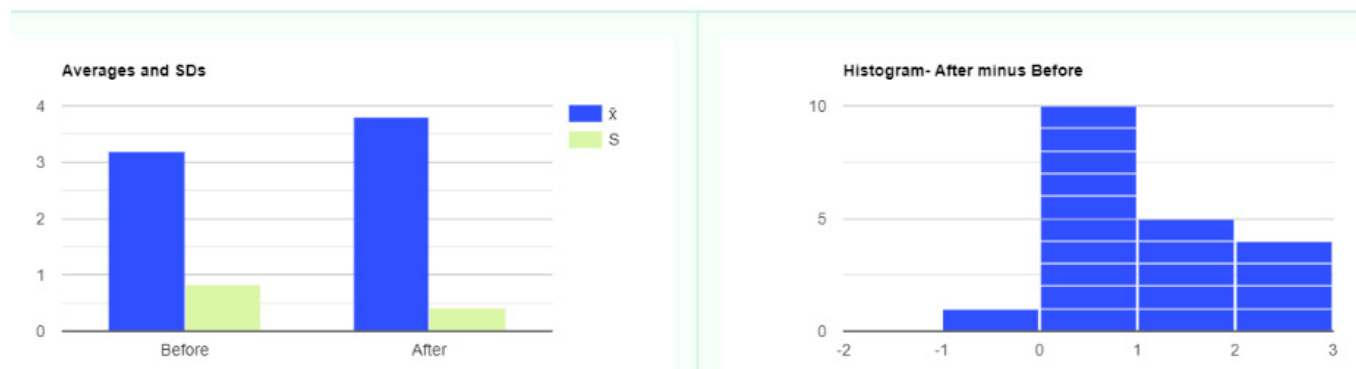
QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Pretest Question: Desired experience

The pre-test questionnaire included one open-ended question asking respondents to share what they would like to obtain from the group facilitation experience (N=28). Both pre-and-post assessment questionnaires can be viewed in Appendix A and B. Emergent themes with representative student quotes are noted in **Table 1**. 100% of the respondents reported wanting to gain experience. This was indicated in responses like, *"I would like to gain hands-on experience about what I will be expected to do in the future and impact people's lives in a positive way, and lastly learn from other's experience to help them find their own path to reach a goal."* Several students mentioned how the experience would better prepare them for graduate school, indicating the desire to obtain knowledge, as reported by 21% of the university students (N=6). Reflecting on this, answers included, *"I want to learn about mandatory reporting procedures, how to address suicidal ideation/child abuse, and how group sessions should be structured."*

Table 1.

Desired experience

Question: Please share things you would like to obtain from this group-facilitation experience:			
Theme	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Gaining Experience	28	100%	*"I would like to obtain experience and practice from this. I'm hoping this will help me get a better idea of what I would like to do in the future."* *"I would like to gain hands-on experience about what I will be expected to do in the future and impact people's lives in a positive way and lastly learn from other's experiences to help them find their own path to reach a goal."*
Gaining Knowledge	6	21%	*"I want to learn about mandatory reporting procedures, how to address suicidal ideation/child abuse, and how group sessions should be structured."* *"I want to learn how to establish boundaries and healthy mentor relationships in a group setting. I also want to learn how to become more confident."*

Posttest Questions

Six open-ended questions were listed in the student volunteers' post-assessment packet. Responses are organized by questions below, with emergent themes for each.

Question: Knowledge/skill gains

Respondents were asked to share the specific skills, expertise, or knowledge they believed to have derived from the group facilitation experience. Emergent themes with representative student quotes are noted in Table 2. Four major themes emerged. Seventy percent of the students (N=20) reported knowledge gains relating to group facilitation, illustrated in responses such as, *"Running these groups brought the textbooks to life and I*

now know how to read and understand a group." The second emergent theme was learning how to adapt and become flexible, as reported by 54% of the students (N=15) and reflected in responses like, *"I learned that you have to be ready for anything and everything."* The third theme that emerged was learning how to be more patient, as reported by 39% of the university students (N=11). A sample quote that exemplifies this is, *"I gained patience, I realized adolescents are tricky to work with."* The final emergent theme was a newly gained skill of lesson planning, which was reported by 17% of the university students (N=5). A sample quote that exemplified this theme was, *"I learned to create topical lessons."*

Table 2.

Knowledge/Skill Gains

Question: Please share things you derived from this group-facilitation experience:			
Theme	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Knowledge/Skill Gains	20	70%	"Running these groups brought the textbooks to life and I now know how to read and understand a group." "I know the right questions to ask to stay on topic while allowing for diverse discussion and inclusion of ideas and opinions. [I learned] how a group functions in general."
Flexibility/Adaptability	15	54%	"I learned that you have to be ready for anything and everything." "I learned how to be flexible in group settings because you never know what you might get!"
Patience	11	39%	"I gained patience, I realized adolescents are tricky to work with." "This process made me a little more patient with myself and others."
Lesson Planning	5	17%	"I learned to create topical lessons." "I feel more comfortable preparing group lessons."

Question: Most beneficial

Respondents were asked to share the most beneficial aspect of their experience. Emergent themes with representative student quotes are noted in Table 3. Three major themes emerged. Mirroring the previous questions' themes, 65% of the university students (N=18) reported that the most beneficial aspect for them was gaining hands-on experience and feeling more comfortable facilitating groups. One student wrote, *"This experience taught me how to read and understand a group; models taught within a classroom or training are*

helpful but applying it in real settings can often look different."

The second theme that emerged was helping adolescents, as indicated by 20% of the university students (N=5.5). A sample quote that exemplifies this is, *"Knowing that I could be able to help adolescents now and in the future."* A final theme that emerged was the benefits of weekly processing groups, as noted by 20% of the university students (N=5.5). Students wrote, *"Processing groups helped me to plan for future groups."*

Table 3.

Most Beneficial

Question: What was the most beneficial aspect of your experience?			
Theme	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Gaining hands-on Experience and Comfort Facilitating Groups	18	65%	"This experience taught me how to read and understand a group; models taught within a classroom or training are helpful, but applying it in real settings can often look different." "I now know the right questions to ask to stay on topic while allowing for diverse discussion and inclusion of ideas and opinions. I also learned how a group functions in general."
Helping Adolescents	5.5	20%	"I want to learn about mandatory reporting procedures, how to address suicidal ideation/child abuse, and how group sessions should be structured." "I want to learn how to establish boundaries and healthy mentor relationships in a group setting. I also want to learn how to become more confident."
Weekly Processing Groups	5.5	20%	"Weekly feedback from the professors improved my confidence" "Processing groups helped me to plan for future groups."

Question: Least Beneficial

Respondents were asked to list any aspect of the initiative they did not find beneficial. No major themes emerged, although 1% of the university students (N=2) mentioned that the high school was "disorganized" on some days.

Question: Value of pre-group training modules

Respondents were asked to rate and explain their perceptions of the importance of the pre-group training on a scale of 1-10. Emergent themes with representative student quotes are noted in Table 4. The average rating was 9 out of 10, indicating that nearly

100% of the university students found these training modules valuable. Thematic data uncovered two themes explaining some reasons behind this rating. Nearly 80% of the university students (N=22) felt the training modules prepared them with more knowledge about group processes. For instance, one student wrote, *"It really helped me prepare for what to expect and gave me ideas for how to address specific issues that could arise."* Another theme that emerged in 15% percent of the students (N = 4) was gaining value from the ethics portion of the training. One student wrote, *"The ethics training gave me a heads-up regarding potential issues that might happen."*

Table 4.

Value of Pre-Group Training Modules

Question: On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important do you feel your pre-group training was (e.g., boundaries, ethics)? Explain			
Theme	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Knowledge about Groups	22	79%	"It really helped me prepare for what to expect and gave me ideas for how to address specific issues that could arise." "It gave me needed confidence to running these groups, I felt more prepared."
Ethics	4	15%	"Ethics in groups is like the boundaries and rules that must be followed in order to make your experience and the clients the best possible without problems (hopefully)." "The ethics training gave me a heads-up regarding potential issues that might happen."

Question: Value of weekly processing groups

Respondents were asked to rate and explain their perceptions of the importance of the weekly processing groups on a scale of 1-10. Emergent themes with representative student quotes are noted in Table 5. The average rating was 8.7 out of 10, indicating that close to 90% found this experience valuable. The thematic analysis revealed two emergent themes, providing reasons for this high rating. Thirty-nine percent of the university students (N=11) indicated that the processing groups provided them with ideas, knowledge, and/or content. For instance, one student wrote, *"I learned a lot in processing, and it gave me great ideas for groups."* The second emergent theme was feedback. 25% of the university students (N = 8) believed that weekly supervision provided them with valuable feedback they could use for subsequent groups. For instance, one student wrote, *"Processing groups provided us with a place to obtain feedback and express concerns."*

Table 5.

Value of Weekly Processing Groups

Question: On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important do you feel the weekly processing groups were? Explain			
Theme	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Ideas, Knowledge, and/or Content	11	39	"I learned a lot in processing and it gave me great ideas for groups." "Provided me with content to run groups."
Obtain Feedback	7	25%	"Processing groups provided us with a place to obtain feedback and express concerns." "Feedback from professors was really helpful."

Question: Value of facilitating psychoeducation groups

Respondents were asked to rate and explain their perceptions of the importance of group facilitation in undergraduate psychology, counseling, and/or behavioral health on a scale of 1-10. Emergent themes with representative student quotes are noted in Table 6. The average rating was 9.93 out of 10, the highest of all responses, meaning all students (N=28) felt it was important. Two major themes arose in the thematic analysis. Ninety-three percent of the university students (N=26) reported that this experience provided them with career preparation and hands-on experience. A response that captured this is, *"The only way we will truly be able to learn and use what we hear about in the classroom is to talk it out and apply it."* The second major theme that emerged regarding the value of this experience was resume building, as reported by 24% of the university students. One student wrote, *"Along with knowledge, experience is something that future employers greatly value. This initiative is a major contributor to my resume. Highly recommend!"*

Table 6.

Value of Facilitating Psychoeducation Groups

Question: On a scale of -10 (10 being the highest), how important do you feel it is for undergraduate psychology, counseling, and/or behavioral health students to facilitate groups like the Alhambra Initiative? Why?			
Theme	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Career preparation and Hands-On experience	26	93	*"The only way we will truly be able to learn and use what we hear about in the classroom is to take it out and apply it."* *"It is a great opportunity to get hands-on experience before we get into the real world. It tests your patience, as well as how you respond to the students. It helped me specifically get more experience since I did this and had group dynamics at the same time."*
Resume Building	7	28%	"Along with knowledge, experience is something that future employers greatly value. This initiative is a major contributor to my resume. Highly recommend!" "This experience will look great on my resume."

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the impact of a behavioral health program on undergraduate student volunteers' preparedness for their future careers. The study used quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The results revealed that the program had a positive impact on students' preparedness for behavioral health professions, as well as their communication and adaptability skills. The program also exposed students to working with teenagers and fostered teamwork, which are essential skills for success in many professional contexts. Additionally, the program enhanced students' resumes, which is critical for aspiring professionals seeking to enter the workforce (Smith & Douglas, 2020). Interestingly, some students' perceptions of preparedness decreased after obtaining volunteer field experience, which is unsurprising since real-world experiences are not typically taught in textbooks. The study revealed that almost a quarter of the students felt unprepared to handle group culture, indicating a need for increased cultural awareness. Developing multicultural competency in undergraduate students is important, and active field experience is a way to foster this, as it promotes self-awareness, knowledge of the field and clientele, and the necessary skill sets for success (Watkins et al., 2019). This is an area for further development in the volunteer program.

Experiential learning outside the classroom significantly increased preparedness for professional collaboration, as evidenced by the qualitative response data. To enhance student goal retention, universities can provide opportunities for professional collaboration that align with student interests and prior knowledge. Internal mentorship programs and partnerships with external organizations, such as those suggested by Hinton and Patterson (2019), can provide access to diverse perspectives, approaches, and professional networks while also helping students develop new skills like resume writing and expand their knowledge of different industries.

Post-test data revealed that helping adolescents was the most critical aspect of the initiative, highlighting the potential for enhancing career interest, self-efficacy, and passion in the workplace. This can lead to prosocial behaviors, contributing to increased efficacy, passion, and job clarity, ultimately leading to life satisfaction and a sense of purpose (Kaminsky & Behrend, 2015; Reich et al., 2019). While the study found only slight improvements in value alignment, field experience can guide students toward different career routes, potentially saving time and resources. The study emphasized the importance of ethics training, lesson planning, and processing and reflection of the volunteer experience, which are crucial for success in the behavioral health field.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study include the short duration of the volunteer experience, lasting only eight weeks, which may have limited exposure to group dynamics. Additionally, the small sample size of undergraduate student volunteers from a single school within a large metropolitan area in the Southwest United States may not represent a broad range of opinions and perspectives. Another limitation of our study is that most participants were female, which may limit the generalizability of our findings to a more balanced gender distribution. While efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample, future research should aim to include a more equal representation of male and female participants to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon. The use of qualitative methodology may have potentially skewed respondent comments, thus making the findings not applicable to all behavioral health student volunteers in larger programs across diverse sites. Future research with a larger sample size is needed to validate the results. Another limitation was the lack of clearly defined processes for site-specific operations, which could have impacted the study participants' experience and responses. However, collaboration with site administrators has clarified operational processes since data collection. Expanding to more sites and solidifying site operations could provide a wider range of experiences for student volunteers, supporting further research. It is important to note that all respondents were studying in the behavioral health field and aiming to gain hands-on experience for their resumes. Thus, many of the responses were related to the positive experience of gaining extensive hands-on skills. While this does not reduce the validity of the study's results, it represents another limitation of the study.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of the study offer a compelling case for program administrators and educators to provide volunteer opportunities for undergraduate students in the behavioral health field. Applying knowledge to practical problems in a community outreach effort has the potential to expand a learner's skill set outside the traditional classroom, offering opportunities for more clarity and preparedness as they plan for a future career. The findings indicate that such programs have the potential to support student's personal and professional growth while also providing valuable hands-on experience in the field. However, this is just the beginning. This study lays the groundwork for further investigation of what is needed to support undergraduate students with career preparation beyond the classroom. The results call for institutions to take a proactive role in providing students with the resources and support they need to succeed.

This study provides a clear roadmap for institutions seeking to foster a culture of excellence and prepare students for success in the workforce. The success of the program evaluated in our study provides a model for other institutions to implement similar programs and benefit both college and high school students in their local areas. By carefully considering the specific needs and challenges faced by students in their respective communities, institutions can develop effective mentorship programs that facilitate positive academic and personal development outcomes while serving the needs of the community.

Strong partnerships with local high schools and community organizations will also be crucial for program success and sustainability. It is up to us as educators and program administrators to take action and make a difference in the lives of our students. Future research might explore the impact of similar initiatives on the cultural competence and collaboration abilities of university students, as well as the impact of such initiatives on high school students in different socioeconomic neighborhoods and those with specific needs. By addressing gaps in research regarding the value of undergraduate support systems, institutions can help their student population thrive and overcome barriers to knowledge and skills that benefit both students and their chosen professions. Such research will contribute to the development of effective programs and strategies that can help address the challenges faced by individuals from underprivileged backgrounds and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the behavioral health field.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

- Why do you want to participate in this volunteer opportunity?

- What skills and abilities do you have that you can contribute as a volunteer?

- Describe how you can be a role model for high school students.

- Describe a time when you were given feedback from a co-worker or supervisor that was difficult to hear.

- How comfortable do you feel working with different cultures and world views?

- How would you respond in the following situations?

- A high school student shared that they had thoughts of hurting themselves

- A high school student showed up under the influence of an illegal substance

- A high school student shared that they were being abused by someone and has not told anyone about this

Appendix B: Pre- and post- psychoeducational group facilitation questionnaires

Alhambra Pre-Group Demographic Information

Thanks for participating in this study! Please fill out **ALL** of the following information before taking the test anxiety survey:

- Full Name _____
- Sex/Gender _____
- Age _____
- Year in School _____
- Major (e.g. sociology, psychology) _____
- Racial background (e.g. Hispanic, white, black, Asian, mixed) _____
- Religious background (if any) _____

Pre- and Post-psychoeducational Group Facilitation Questionnaire

For each question, please circle the number that best describes your feelings:

1. I feel clear about my future career path or profession

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

2. I currently feel confident about facilitating a psychoeducational group

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

3. I feel that facilitating groups will prepare me for my future career (e.g., practice)

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

4. I feel confident that I am doing work that aligns with my life purpose or mission

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

5. I currently feel prepared to develop a topic lesson for a psychoeducational group session.

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

6. I currently feel prepared to address a crisis situation as it relates to working with youth.

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

7. I understand group culture and how that impacts group processes.

0= Not true at all	3= True
1= Not sure	4= Very true
2= Somewhat true	

8. I currently feel prepared to collaborate with others in a professional setting.

0= Not true at all	4= Very true
1= Not sure	
2= Somewhat true	
3= True	

9.   I currently feel prepared to apply professional ethics to working with others.

                    0= Not true at all   3= True
                    1= Not sure   4= Very true
                    2= Somewhat true

10. Please share things you would like to obtain from this group-facilitation experience:

Post-Psychoeducational Group Facilitation Open Ended Questions

1.   Please share some specific skills/expertise/knowledge you derived from this group facilitation experience:

2.   What was the most beneficial aspect of your experience?

3.   What was the least beneficial aspect of your experience?

4.   On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important do you feel your pre-group training was (e.g., boundaries, ethics)? Explain

5.   On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important do you feel the weekly processing groups were? Explain

6.   On a scale of -10 (10 being the highest), how important do you feel it is for undergraduate psychology, counseling, and/or behavioral health students to facilitate groups like the Alhambra Initiative? Why?