# The Volunteer’s Return: Mutual Benefit in Community Service and Lived Experience

Dane Tilbury
Colorado State University
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# The Volunteer's Return: Literature Review

## Introduction

For decades, volunteer work has been studied primarily through the lens of its impact on recipients and communities. Food banks measure meals served; youth mentoring programs track educational outcomes; animal shelters count adoptions. These are important, and regularly measured metrics, but they tell only half the story. The act of volunteering is fundamentally a reciprocal relationship, yet the benefits attributed to the volunteer have historically received much less attention until very recently. This literature review synthesizes existing academic research to answer a central question: What does scholarly literature say volunteers gain from unremunerated service, and how do these benefits support the thesis that volunteering is a mutually beneficial exchange?

This review is organized thematically by benefit type, beginning with the theoretical framework established by Wilson and Musick (1999), which promotes volunteering as a productive activity that generates psychological, social, and moral rewards for the volunteer. From there, the review examines three major categories of documented benefits: psychological and mental health improvements, social and cultural capital development, and skill acquisition with professional translation. Each section evaluates the extent to which the literature supports a mutually beneficial relationship, noting where evidence is strong but also where gaps remain.

The sources reviewed include foundational studies (Wilson & Musick, 1999; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Janey, Tuckwiller & Lonquist, 1991), meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Jenkinson et al., 2013; Lindsay, 2015; Nichol et al., 2023; Filges et al., 2022), and qualitative research (Jau & Hodgson, 2017; Culligan, 2019). Together, these sources span more than three decades of research and represent diverse methodologies, populations, and volunteer contexts. The review concludes with a synthesis of key findings, identification of gaps, and a transition into the personal reflection section that follows.

## Theoretical Foundation

A rigorous examination of volunteer benefits must begin with a model explaining why volunteering produces personal rewards. Wilson and Musick (1999) provided exactly such a model in their foundational work, "The Effects of Volunteering on the Volunteer," which remains one of the most cited frameworks within the field. Drawing on human capital theory and

role identity theory, Wilson and Musick argued that volunteering is a form of productive work that generates three distinct types of benefits for the volunteer: psychological rewards, social rewards, and moral rewards. Psychological rewards refer to improvements in mental health, self-image, and overall subjective well-being. Wilson and Musick proposed that volunteering provides a sense of purpose, reduces feelings of isolation, and enhances self-efficacy. Social rewards encompass the development of social networks, the accumulation of social capital, and increased community integration. Moral rewards involve the affirmation of personal values and self-satisfaction from executing an altruistic action. Importantly, Wilson and Musick argued that these three reward types are not mutually exclusive and can reinforce one another.

What makes Wilson and Musick's (1999) framework particularly useful for the mutual-benefit thesis is their explicit rejection of a purely altruistic model. They acknowledged that volunteers are often motivated by a mix of self and others, and they argued that the benefits volunteers receive do not diminish the value of the service provided. Instead, the reciprocal nature of volunteering is a feature, not a bug. This position directly supports the central argument of my thesis: helping others is fundamentally a reciprocal relationship that benefits the giver and receiver alike.

Wilson and Musick (1999) also identified important moderators of volunteer benefits, including age, socioeconomic status, and the intensity of volunteer engagement. Older adults, for example, tend to report larger psychological gains from volunteering than younger adults as volunteering can substitute for social roles lost through retirement. These moderating effects will be revisited throughout this review.

**Psychological and Mental Health Benefits**

Jenkinson et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis examining the mental health benefits of volunteering. After screening over 4,000 records, they included 40 studies in their final analysis. The results were striking: volunteering was associated with significant reductions in depression, increased life satisfaction, and enhanced well-being. The effect sizes were comparable to those observed for other non-clinical health interventions, such as exercise or social group participation. Jenkinson et al. noted that the strongest effects emerged for older adults and for volunteers who engaged in service at least once per week, suggesting a dose-response relationship.

Importantly for the mutual-benefit thesis, Jenkinson et al. (2013) also examined whether the mental health benefits of volunteering were contingent on the volunteer's motivation. They found that volunteers who reported altruistic motives actually experienced larger mental health improvements than those who reported self-focused motives. This finding directly refutes the concern that self-interested volunteering is less valuable to recipients. On the contrary, genuine concern for others amplifies the reciprocal benefits of service.

Thoits and Hewitt (2001) provided complementary evidence using data from a nationally representative sample of Americans. Their findings supported a bidirectional relationship: individuals who volunteered more reported higher well-being later, and individuals with higher well-being were more likely to volunteer later. This reciprocal dynamic is precisely what the mutual-benefit thesis would predict. Volunteering and well-being reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle.

Thoits and Hewitt (2001) also reported a striking finding regarding mortality: volunteers had significantly lower mortality rates than non-volunteers, even after controlling for physical health, socioeconomic status, and baseline well-being. The protective effect was comparable to quitting smoking. From the perspective of mutual benefit, this finding is powerful: the volunteer may literally live longer as a result of service.

The most current and comprehensive evidence comes from Nichol and colleagues (2023), who conducted an umbrella review synthesizing 28 systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Nichol et al. concluded that volunteering has small-to-moderate positive effects on mental, social, and physical health, with the strongest evidence supporting reduced depression and increased psychological functioning. Notably, Nichol et al. identified several moderators relevant to the present thesis: benefits increase with age; benefits are larger when volunteers engage in reflection of their service; benefits are enhanced when volunteers report altruistic motivations; and volunteers working directly with vulnerable populations report larger benefits than those performing behind-the-scenes tasks.

The evidence for psychological and mental health benefits of volunteering is robust and replicated across multiple study designs and populations. Volunteers experience less depression, greater life satisfaction, enhanced well-being, and lower mortality risk. Critically for the mutual-benefit thesis, the largest benefits accrue to volunteers who are altruistically motivated, who work directly with vulnerable populations, and who reflect on their experiences.

**Social and Cultural Capital Development**

Beyond psychological improvements, volunteers consistently report gaining social connections, community belonging, and expanded networks. These outcomes fall under the umbrella of social and cultural capital. The primary source for this section is Lindsay's (2015) scoping review, which examined the benefits of volunteering for individuals working with children and youth with special needs, though her findings can be applied in a broader sense.

Social capital refers to the networks of relationships, norms of reciprocity, and trust that facilitate cooperation (Lindsay, 2015). For volunteers, social capital manifests as new friendships, expanded professional networks, and a sense of belonging. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge and competencies that allow individuals to navigate different social settings. Volunteers gain cultural capital when they learn to communicate with populations different from themselves or acquire specialized knowledge about a social issue.

Lindsay (2015) argued that volunteering is uniquely well-suited to generate both forms of capital because it places individuals in structured, prosocial environments where cooperation is the explicit goal. Lindsay found consistent evidence that volunteers reported significant social capital gains, including meaningful friendships and greater community integration. One noteworthy finding concerns the quality of social connections: volunteers reported that relationships formed in volunteer settings were characterized by higher levels of trust and authenticity compared to relationships formed in other contexts. In other words, volunteering is where genuine people can be found.

Lindsay (2015) also identified a reciprocal dynamic that directly supports the mutual-benefit thesis. Volunteers who gained social capital through service were more likely to remain engaged, providing consistency and stability for recipients. Cultural capital gains were also well-documented: volunteers acquired new knowledge about specific disabilities, learned communication strategies, and developed greater empathy. These gains expanded well beyond the volunteer setting; volunteers reported applying their new competencies in workplaces, families, and social circles. Some volunteers even pursued career changes into special education or social work as a direct result of their experiences.

While Lindsay (2015) focused on special needs populations, the framework applies equally to volunteers working with at-risk youth. Filges and colleagues (2022) conducted a systematic review and found that volunteer-based mentoring programs were among the most

effective interventions for improving life circumstances of at-risk youth. At-risk youth who distrust traditional authority figures are often willing to form trusting relationships with volunteers precisely because volunteers are perceived as neutral and free of institutional agendas. From the volunteer's perspective, working with at-risk youth produces substantial gains: deeper understanding of structural inequality, patience, conflict-resolution skills, and meaningful relationships with marginalized youth.

The evidence for social and cultural capital development through volunteering is strong and consistent. Volunteers gain new friendships, community connections, specialized knowledge, and cultural competencies. The volunteer's social and cultural capital gains are directly linked to better outcomes for recipients, linking back to the mutual-benefit thesis. A volunteer who is socially connected and culturally competent is a more effective volunteer, creating an everlasting cycle of reciprocal benefit.

**Skill Acquisition and Professional Transferability**

A third major category of documented volunteer benefits concerns the acquisition of skills that transfer to professional and educational contexts. The foundational source for this section is Janey, Tuckwiller, and Lonquist's (1991) study on skill transferability from volunteering to professional life. Although this study is older than other sources, its findings have been consistently replicated.

Janey et al. (1991) surveyed volunteers across multiple organizations and developed a framework categorizing volunteer-acquired skills into three domains: technical skills, interpersonal skills, and organizational skills. The most striking finding was that volunteers rated interpersonal skills as both the most frequently developed and the most transferable to professional contexts. Volunteers reported that learning to work with diverse populations, handle difficult conversations, and collaborate under pressure were skills they used daily in their paid employment. This finding is particularly relevant to the mutual-benefit thesis because interpersonal skills are precisely the skills that make volunteers more effective at serving recipients.

Lindsay's (2015) review provided context-specific evidence for skill development among volunteers working with special needs youth, including patience and emotional regulation, adaptive communication, problem-solving under pressure, and advocacy. Similarly, Filges et al.

(2022) found that volunteers working with at-risk youth developed skills in de-escalation, boundary-setting, and building trust with individuals who had been harmed by prior relationships with authority figures. Several studies reviewed by Filges et al. found that volunteers subsequently pursued careers in social work, education, or criminal justice, directly crediting their volunteer experience.

Jau and Hodgson's (2017) study of animal shelter volunteers provided a unique perspective. Volunteers reported acquiring skills including patience, emotional regulation, teamwork, handling animal behavior, and managing the emotional toll of euthanasia decisions. Critically, Jau and Hodgson found that these skills transferred to professional contexts in unexpected ways. One volunteer in corporate human resources reported that learning to read animal body language made her more attentive to nonverbal cues from colleagues. Culligan's (2019) dissertation reinforced these findings, with one participant stating, "I learned more about handling crisis situations from a scared, aggressive dog than from any management training I ever took" (Culligan, 2019, p. 74).

The evidence on skill acquisition has practical implications beyond academic interest. Nichol et al. (2023) noted that many volunteer organizations explicitly frame volunteering as a career-development opportunity. From a mutual-benefit perspective, this is entirely appropriate. Volunteers who join service programs to gain professional skills are not "less altruistic" than volunteers motivated purely by other-oriented concern. As Jenkinson et al. (2013) found, even volunteers with self-focused motivations still produce benefits for recipients. At the end of the day, help is help, regardless of motive.

Volunteering produces measurable gains in technical, interpersonal, and organizational skills that transfer directly to paid employment. The most consistently reported transferable skills are interpersonal: communication, teamwork, patience, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and advocacy. Critically for the mutual-benefit thesis, the same skills that make volunteers more employable also make them more effective at serving recipients. Thus, skill acquisition is not a selfish byproduct of volunteering but a component of the reciprocal relationship.

**Synthesis, Gaps, and Transition to Personal Reflection**

This literature review has synthesized evidence from nine sources spanning more than three decades of research on the personal benefits of volunteering. The evidence consistently

supports the central thesis that volunteering is a mutually beneficial relationship. Volunteers gain psychological and mental health improvements, social and cultural capital, and transferable professional skills.

Several key takeaways emerge. First, mutual benefit is empirically observable across diverse volunteer contexts, populations, and research methodologies. This is not a speculative claim; it is a replicable finding supported by meta-analyses, studies, and systematic reviews. Second, self-oriented and other-oriented motivations are not in conflict. Volunteers who volunteer to gain skills or build their resumes still produce benefits for recipients. The binary distinction between "selfish" and "selfless" volunteering is a false one. Third, the most meaningful benefits often emerge from challenging experiences. Volunteers who face difficulty and discomfort report the largest personal gains (Lindsay, 2015; Culligan, 2019). Fourth, context matters. While many benefits generalize across settings, each volunteer context produces unique benefits that align the volunteer's needs with the recipient's needs.

Despite the strength of the evidence, several gaps remain. First, most research focuses on older adult volunteers. Less is known about the benefits of volunteering for young adults. Second, long-term follow-up is limited. Most studies measure volunteer benefits over months or a few years. Thoits and Hewitt (2001) is an exception, but more long-term research is needed. Third, the mechanisms linking volunteering to benefits are not fully understood. Why does volunteering reduce depression? Likely a combination of social connection, purpose, and physiological effects, but the relative contribution of each remains unclear. Fourth, and most relevant to the present thesis, the integration of personal reflection with empirical research is rare. Most volunteer studies measure outcomes quantitatively but do not ask volunteers to reflect on their experiences in a structured way. Nichol et al. (2023) noted that reflection enhances volunteer benefits, but they did not examine this mechanism directly. This gap creates an opportunity for the present thesis: by integrating personal reflection with the academic literature, this project contributes something that purely quantitative studies cannot.

The literature reviewed here establishes a clear empirical foundation for the mutual-benefit thesis. Volunteers gain psychological, social, cultural, and professional benefits. Recipients benefit from more effective, consistent, emotionally invested volunteers. The relationship is genuinely reciprocal. But academic literature, for all its rigor, cannot capture the lived texture of volunteering. It cannot convey what it feels like to sit with a special needs youth

who has never had a real friend. It cannot describe the frustration of trying to connect with an at-risk youth who has been betrayed by every adult in their life. It cannot replicate the quiet joy of a shelter dog finally trusting a human hand. These experiences are the raw material from which the literature's abstract findings are constructed.

The following personal reflection section will contextualize the literature through my own volunteer experiences with special needs youth, at-risk youth, and youth coaching and vet clinic work. I will examine where my personal journey aligns with the academic findings and where it diverges. I will reflect on the challenges that produced the most growth. In doing so, I hope to bridge the gap between empirical research and lived experience, demonstrating that the act of helping others is fundamentally a reciprocal relationship that benefits the giver as much as the receiver – in the messy, specific, transformative reality of one volunteer's life.

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## The Volunteer's Return - My Story

### Introduction: Why I Wrote This Thesis

When I started this project, I thought I knew why I volunteered. I did it because it was the right thing to do. Because I was supposed to. Because other people needed help. But as I read through the literature – Wilson and Musick's framework, Jenkinson's meta-analysis, Lindsay's scoping review – I kept having small moments of recognition. That happened to me. I felt that. I didn't know there was a name for it.

The literature says volunteering is mutually beneficial, but reading about reduced depression scores and increased social capital felt abstract until I matched it against my own memory: the first time a special needs student remembered my name, the frustration of coaching six-year-olds who would rather pick dandelions than play soccer, the slow trust-building with a "troubled youth" who had every reason not to trust me, and the quiet focus of holding a scared animal at the vet clinic.

This reflection is my attempt to bridge that gap. I will walk through my volunteer experiences – Unified Sports, little league coaching, Partners mentoring, and my current work at a vet clinic – and hold them up against the academic literature. Where do they align? Where do they diverge? And what does the literature miss that only lived experience can reveal?

### Unified Sports: Special Needs Youth and the Theory of Reciprocal Benefit

For two years, I served as the president of my high school's Unified Sports program. At its core, Unified Sports pairs students with and without intellectual disabilities on the same teams to help teach inclusion and teamwork. My role was split: some days I sat with students in academic settings, helping with homework or just being a quiet presence. Other days I was on the field or court, teaching the fundamentals of basketball, soccer, and some of the less tangible qualities that come with team sports – sportsmanship, resilience, how to lose without losing yourself.

The literature would call what I experienced "social and cultural capital development." Lindsay (2015) described volunteers gaining "disability competency," or the ability to interact confidently and respectfully with individuals with disabilities. That sounds academic. Here is what it actually felt like.

As president of the program, I was responsible for organizing events outside of class time and between different schools. If another high school had a Unified Sports program, I could reach out to their school and we could organize an event. The largest turnout, and my greatest success as president, was organizing a Saturday kickball game between my high school and two neighboring ones. Over 60 students made it, and I was ecstatic that it ended up working out! Lots of planning paid off. All of the kids were able to make new friends, share drinks, and play kickball. We stayed for a few hours, and by the time the event was over, no one wanted to leave. At pick-up, kids were introducing their new friends to each other's parents, exchanging phone numbers, and having fun. I was overjoyed that my efforts had impacted so many young people, and that new friendships which would not have happened otherwise could blossom because of it.

My favorite memory from this program was a special bond I formed with the sweetest kid named Drew. Most of the special needs children I helped in this program had some type of cognitive disorder, where their body could still operate near full capacity. The program was designed to encourage athletics, so it was more targeted to those with developed motor skills. That was not the case for Drew. He used a walker to traverse school grounds and always needed someone to assist. He could play some of the less physical games but was unable to jump in like the other kids. I was immediately drawn to him, as his bright smile and bubbly personality lit up any room he was in. Of course, I wanted to include him in the regular curriculum, but he just was not able to integrate well with the rest of the group. I spoke with his aide, trying to figure out another way to bond with him, so I ended up coming into my high school once a week during my free period to sit with him during class, play iPad video games, and help him with his schoolwork. I think I was able to make an impact here, because after a few months he would flash this huge smile whenever he saw me. This alone made my experience all the more worth it.

Back to academia. What the literature gets right: Lindsay (2015) found that volunteers working with special needs youth reported deep emotional rewards from forming relationships with youth who were often socially isolated. That was absolutely my experience. The joy of "reaching" a student who had difficulty connecting with others was not a small part of my week; it was often the best part. Beyond the emotional rewards, I also learned practical skills that have stayed with me. Working with students who had different communication styles taught me to slow down, to listen with more than my ears, and to celebrate small victories – a skill I now use daily in the vet clinic when working with frightened animals who cannot tell me what is wrong. I

also have pocketed the necessary skills needed to organize grandiose events, which boils down to patience and persistence.

But the literature also says something I initially resisted. Lindsay noted that volunteers reported learning the most from challenging experiences – meltdowns, communication breakdowns, moments of frustration. I remember when Drew was just getting started in the program, he would tantrum and scream because he was not able to do all of the things everyone else could. I would try to reassure him, calm him down, but nothing would work. I could not break through. At the time, I just wanted the moment to end, but looking back, that was the moment I grew the most. The literature calls this "emotional regulation" and "problem-solving under pressure." I call it learning to stay calm when everything inside you wants to panic. Candy really is all-powerful.

The one divergence I found in my experiences was that the literature seems to focus on older adult volunteers (Nichol et al., 2023; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). I was seventeen. The benefits I experienced – patience, perspective, the ability to communicate across difference – may have been even more formative because I was young. The literature does not spend enough time on adolescent and young adult volunteers, where the reciprocal benefits can be even greater. That is a gap, and my experience suggests it matters.

The mutual benefit in Unified Sports was tangible. The students I worked with gained a friend, a coach, and someone who believed in them. I gained disability competency, emotional regulation, and the quiet confidence that comes from being trusted. Neither of us walked away the same.

**Little League Coach: Patience, Dandelions, and the Long Game**

Volunteering as a youth soccer and basketball coach was different from Unified Sports in one crucial way: the kids were not special needs, but they were still learning everything for the first time. Six-year-olds do not understand offsides. They do not understand why they cannot pick up the ball. They definitely do not understand why they cannot stop to examine a particularly interesting dandelion in the middle of a possession, or a butterfly that happened upon the field.

The literature on skill acquisition (Janey, Tuckwiller & Lonquist, 1991) emphasizes "interpersonal skills" as the most transferable benefit of volunteering. Coaching taught me

interpersonal skills, but not the kind you can put on a resume easily. It taught me that enthusiasm is contagious but so is frustration. It taught me that you cannot force a child to care about something they do not yet understand. You can only model what caring looks like and hope it sticks.

My coaching experiences were shorter, as I volunteered to coach because my little brother wanted to play. He decided after two seasons of soccer and one season of basketball that sports were not for him, and his subsequent choice of dancing was not my forte. It was a great experience, however, as I was able to help teach fundamentals of the sports I loved to kids who had never played before. I was able to influence their first impressions, so patience and a positive attitude were vital. I also tried to teach teamwork, patience, and work ethic, which was my first mistake. The little whippersnappers had no desire to learn any of these things. All of the drills we would teach would vanish come game time, and the kids would move around the field in a giant horde, losing one or two that tripped or got distracted. And all you could do is laugh. Definitely not the uber-competitive, cutthroat games I was used to, but it reinforced the importance of patience and the whimsicality of adolescence. I was there to help promote happiness, not victory, which was a very important experience for me moving forward.

Transitioning back to the literature, Jenkinson et al. (2013) found that volunteers with altruistic motives experienced larger mental health benefits than those with self-focused motives. Coaching tested that for me. There were Saturdays when I did not want to be there. I was tired. I had homework. My team did not really care about being there, including my little brother. But I showed up anyway, and by the end of the game, I felt better. Not because I felt like I was being altruistic, but because I had forgotten myself in the act of helping someone else. The literature calls this "bidirectional reinforcement" (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). I call it the dandelion principle: you show up for someone else, and somewhere along the way, you end up showing up for yourself.

What the literature misses: the boredom. Volunteering is not always meaningful in the moment. Sometimes it is just standing on a soccer field in the rain while a child asks for the fifth time why they cannot use their hands. The literature focuses on measurable outcomes, like reduced depression and increased life satisfaction. But it does not often discuss the mundane reality of volunteer work, which I think is a critical oversight because the mundane is where commitment is tested. The literature says dose-response matters (Jenkinson et al., 2013) – more

hours produce more benefits. But it does not fully capture that the first hundred hours might feel pointless, and the benefit only becomes visible after you push through.

Looking back, the kids I coached probably remember me as the coach who blew the whistle too much. This was the first impression I gave because I had my sights set on victory instead of fun. But I remember them as the ones who taught me that winning is not the point. Showing up is the point. Trying again after a loss is the point. Cheering louder for the kid who finally made contact with the ball than for the star player – that is the point. I hope I taught them that. I know they taught me.

**Partners: Trust and the Troubled Youth**

Partners was different. Partners paired me with a "troubled youth" – the program's words, not mine. He was struggling academically, emotionally, and staying engaged in his own life. He had been let down by adults before. I could tell within the first visit.

Filges et al. (2022) found that volunteer mentors are often more effective than paid professionals for at-risk youth because volunteers are perceived as neutral. No institutional power. No paycheck. Just a person choosing to show up. That was my only advantage. I had no training in trauma-informed care. I had no degree in social work. I just kept showing up and engaging amidst the discomfort of the situation.

The process for me and "Steven" – we are not allowed to disclose real names, and Steven is the name I have used thus far – was at times painfully slow. He was slow to open up and very aware that I was there to try to "help." During the matchmaking process we all sat down – the Partners organizer, Steven and his mom, and myself – and talked a little bit to try to break the ice. I think we played Uno. It was pretty quiet on Steven's side as the three adults carried the conversation. I was able to recognize how that could be uncomfortable from a kid's perspective, so after we finished, I asked if I could take Steven away to go throw the football with me. It was here that the real ice-breaking began, as the pressure from the situation dropped.

I could go on forever about all of the little steps we made and the specific things that worked and did not work for him, but the bottom line is that Steven and I were able to break through some of those walls using sports as a catalyst. I was able to bring back some of my high school Unified Sports techniques to aid in his opening up. After a few months of showing up every week, we were becoming good friends. He would smile when he would see me come in,

and it seemed like he genuinely wanted to be there. We made great progress on schoolwork, he opened up to me about his at-home troubles, and he even decided to start practicing basketball (my favorite sport to play). He tried out, and made the team the following year. We had a lot of fun throughout this first year. I took him Christmas shopping for his family, went to see the Minecraft movie together, went to grab lunch, etc. Everything was going very smoothly.

The following year was a bit more difficult, and I wish that there was a happy ending to this story, but halfway through my second year working with Steven, I realized he was lying to me about his grades. He had been telling me that his test scores were good and he was learning the information, but one day while I was checking in, the front desk lady asked me if I could talk to him about trying harder in class. When I brought this up with Steven, I found out he had been kicked off the basketball team due to poor grades, and our relationship changed. It felt like the trust and companionship we had built thus far began to crumble, as I realized I was more a friend to Steven than a mentor. Of course I always asked and offered to help with schoolwork, but I never second-guessed the responses he gave. From that point onward, it seemed like our relationship was on the decline. He was present, but not really there.

I wish I could say that there was some miraculous recovery and everything jumped right back on track after a movie-esque event brought us close together again, but that is just not the case here. I found out from his mom that at a similar time as I caught him in a lie, his friends at school betrayed him, completely exiling him from his friend group. This sent Steven into a spiral, and he started refusing to go to school. After a month or two of trying to reach him, we had to abandon the partnership as Steven enrolled in online school to get away from the toxicity. It was against the terms of our partnership to continue meeting while not in school, and his mom proved difficult for me to work with. I wish there was a happy ending here, but there is much more to learn from failure than success.

The literature on social capital (Lindsay, 2015) emphasizes the benefits volunteers receive: new friendships, expanded networks, a sense of purpose. But with Partners, the benefit I received was less tangible. I learned that trust is not built in grand gestures. It is built in small, boring consistencies. Showing up on time. Remembering his birthday. Apologizing when I was wrong. Following through on a promise, even a small one. These seem trivial, but they are not. For a kid who has been promised things that never came, a kept promise is everything.

Culligan (2019) wrote about animal volunteering as "the purest case of mutual benefit" because neither party has hidden motives. That is not true for at-risk youth mentoring. We both had hidden motives. He was testing me to see if I would leave like everyone else. I was trying to prove something to myself about the kind of person I was. The mutual benefit was real, but it was messy. He gained a consistent adult presence who did not give up on him. I gained a window into a life very different from my own and the humility of realizing that I could not fix anything – I could only be present. I was there for him until the end, and I wish that things could have been different.

Filges et al. (2022) documented that youth matched with volunteer mentors had better outcomes in school attendance, academic achievement, and reduced contact with the justice system. These changes were evident during the first year I worked with him but were lost in the second. That is another thing the literature does not dwell on: the endings. Volunteering often ends ambiguously. You do not get a closing ceremony. You just stop showing up, or they do. That ambiguity is hard to measure, but it is real. I still wonder about him. I hope he is okay.

What the literature misses: the emotional cost of volunteering with at-risk populations. Compassion fatigue. The fear that you are not helping, or worse, that you are causing harm. The guilt of moving on with your life while they cannot. Nichol et al. (2023) mentioned that reflection enhances volunteer benefits, but no one told me that reflection also hurts sometimes.

Partners taught me that volunteering is not about being a hero. It is about being a witness. Showing up. Staying. And accepting that you may never know if you made a difference. That is hard. But it is also, I think, the most honest form of service.

**Vet Clinic: Not Volunteer Work, But the Same Muscle**

I am currently working at a veterinary clinic in Windsor, Colorado to help prepare myself for vet school. It is paid employment, not volunteer work, but I include it here because it uses the same muscle: caring for beings who cannot fully advocate for themselves.

Jau and Hodgson (2017) described animal shelter volunteers' unique benefits: non-judgmental acceptance, tangible stress reduction through physical contact, and a sense of purpose from caring for creatures who cannot care for themselves. I experience all of those things at the clinic.

Although a recent addition to my life, for the first time outside of volunteer work I have felt passion for the actions I am doing. One specific morning comes to mind when a German Shepherd came into the clinic after ingesting a lot of antifreeze. The treatment was interesting, as to counteract antifreeze we introduce alcohol to the system. Essentially, we made this dog drunk and pumped him full of fluids and medication. I was in charge of caring for this dog the entire morning – changing IV bags, making sure he did not hurt himself, giving him pets. It felt really good to help a dog like this. He was confused and unsteady, but he leaned into every gentle touch. By the end of my shift, he was stable, and on his way home. Watching him walk out with his owner, tail wagging, made all the stress worth it. That is the mutual benefit I keep coming back to: the dog got his life back, and I got to remember why I am pursuing this path.

Culligan (2019) argued that animal-directed prosocial behavior may represent the purest case of mutual benefit because the relationship is straightforward. The animal needs help. You help. The animal gives you acceptance and stress reduction. No complicated psychology. But Culligan oversimplifies. Working at a vet clinic is emotionally brutal sometimes. You see animals in pain. You see owners who cannot afford care. You see neglect. You see death. The mutual benefit is real – I have never felt more present than when I am holding a scared cat – but it comes with a cost. The literature on volunteer mental health benefits (Jenkinson et al., 2013; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001) focuses on positive outcomes. It does not adequately address compassion fatigue, moral distress, or burnout. My clinic work has taught me that caring for vulnerable beings is not a pure good. It is a trade-off. You give attention and care. You receive meaning and presence. But you also accumulate grief. That does not mean it is not worth doing. It means we need to stop romanticizing volunteering and start being honest about its costs. The mutual-benefit thesis is true, but it is not a fairy tale. It is a transaction.

One thing the literature gets right: the non-judgmental acceptance of animals is real. After a hard day, there is nothing like a purring cat or a dog resting its head on your knee. Jau and Hodgson (2017) documented this. I have lived it. That acceptance does not erase the hard parts, but it balances them. The vet clinic has also taught me something about limits. In volunteering, I could always give more time. At the clinic, I have to clock out. I have to go home. I have to accept that I cannot save every animal. That lesson – learning to care without drowning – is one I am still figuring out. The literature does not have much to say about that either.

**Synthesis: What the Literature Got Right and What It Missed**

Reading the literature after my own experiences felt like looking into a funhouse mirror at the fair. Some things were perfectly reflected. Others were distorted or missing altogether.

*What the literature got right:*

The psychological benefits are real. I experienced reduced stress, increased purpose, and moments of genuine joy. Jenkinson et al. (2013) and Nichol et al. (2023) are not wrong; they just could not capture the texture.

The social and cultural capital benefits are real. Unified Sports taught me disability competency. Partners taught me how to build trust with someone who had been betrayed. Coaching taught me patience I did not know I had.

Skill transferability is real. I use skills from every role in my current job and will continue to do so for the rest of my life. Janey et al. (1991) were onto something.

The mutual-benefit thesis is real. I benefited. The kids I coached benefited. The special needs students I worked with benefited. Steven benefited, hopefully. The animals I care for benefit. That is not self-congratulation. That is just what happened.

*What the literature missed:*

The emotional cost. The literature focuses on benefits, not trade-offs. Compassion fatigue, burnout, grief – these are real, and they are underrepresented.

The boredom. Not every hour feels meaningful. The dose-response model (Jenkinson et al., 2013) assumes more hours = more benefits. But the relationship is not linear.

The ambiguity of endings. Most volunteer relationships end without closure. The literature does not study that, but volunteers live it.

The fact that volunteering does not always feel good. Sometimes it makes you uncomfortable, scared, or guilty. But discomfort is not the opposite of benefit. Sometimes discomfort is the benefit.

The literature on young adult volunteers is thin. Most research focuses on older adults (Nichol et al., 2023). I started volunteering at seventeen. The benefits I experienced at that age – identity formation, skill development, exposure to difference – may be different from the

benefits experienced by retirees. More research is needed on adolescent and young adult volunteers.

**Conclusion: The Volunteer's Return**

I started this thesis wanting to prove that volunteering is mutually beneficial. The literature convinced me that is true. But my own experience taught me that mutual benefit is messier than the papers make it sound. The volunteer's return is not always happiness. Sometimes it is frustration, boredom, guilt, or grief. Sometimes the benefit does not show up until years later. Sometimes you never know if you made a difference.

But here is what I know: I am a different person because I volunteered. I am more patient. I am better at listening. I am less afraid of people who are different from me. I am more willing to sit in discomfort. I know how to build trust with someone who has been hurt. I know how to stay calm when everything is falling apart. The literature calls these "psychological rewards," "social capital," and "transferable skills." I call them becoming the person I wanted to be. Wilson and Musick (1999) wrote that volunteering generates psychological, social, and moral rewards. They were right, but they left something out. Volunteering also generates a story. It gives you something to tell about who you are and who you are trying to become.

This is my story. A kid who showed up to Unified Sports not knowing what he was doing. A coach who learned more from six-year-olds than he ever taught them. A mentor who built trust one small consistency at a time. A vet assistant learning that caring costs something but is still worth it. The literature says volunteering is reciprocal. I agree. But reciprocity is not a balance sheet. It is not "I gave X hours and received Y benefits." It is more like a garden. You plant seeds. Some grow. Some do not. You cannot always see the roots. But if you keep showing up, something will grow. And one day, you will look around and realize you have grown too.

That is the volunteer's return. Not a transaction. A transformation.