

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Health professions students' perceptions of philanthropy and strategies to promote a culture of philanthropy among health professions education students

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Abstract

Background: Little data is available regarding student philanthropy in the context of health professions education. The objective of this study is to examine factors affecting health professions education (HPE) students' perceptions and expectations of philanthropy. **Methods:** A cross-sectional survey assessing demographics and philanthropic experiences, perceptions, and expectations was administered to medical, pharmacy, and graduate students at a health sciences university. **Results:** One hundred thirty-nine students completed the survey. Sixty percent of respondents agree contributions to their alma mater make a difference, 57% plan to volunteer time as alumni, and 40% plan to make monetary contributions as alumni. Fifty-five percent of respondents indicated that would not participate in a student-giving programme. Students who donate financially to their undergraduate or high school alma mater were more likely to agree contributions to their alma mater make a difference ($p = 0.03$). Students who volunteer at their undergraduate or high school alma mater were more likely to plan to volunteer time as an HPE alum ($p = 0.002$). **Conclusion:** Health professions education students who engage in philanthropic initiatives may be more likely to do so as alumni. Educating student pharmacists on the importance and impact of philanthropy may enhance perceptions of giving and willingness to contribute as alumni.

Introduction

Long after graduation, health professions education (HPE) students can leave a lasting impact on their alma mater through philanthropic undertakings as alumni. These efforts may range from monetary donations to volunteerism and service initiatives. From a financial perspective, alumni support is critical in helping to cover the rising costs of institutional operations and providing student scholarships (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Such support is important for private and public institutions (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). While not specific to HPE, monetary giving across all United States (US) higher education institutions was 52.9 billion dollars in the fiscal year 2020-2021 (CASE, 2022). Alumni contributions encompassed 23.2% of all

support, the second greatest percentage after foundation giving, and alumni giving rose 10.8% over the previous year (CASE 2022). This data underscores the significant impact of alumni giving. Outside of monetary donations, alumni who invest time via volunteering to teach, precept, or mentor may also help ensure the continuing success and advancement of these programmes (Castelli & Fredrickson, 2021).

Given the importance of alumni engagement, HPE institutions would benefit from developing a philanthropic culture among current students rather than waiting until the transition to alumni (Perera & Fredrickson, 2021). It has been suggested that informing students of the importance and impact of philanthropy may encourage them to give post-

graduation (Bowman, 2013). To date, little data exists which examines factors affecting HPE student and alumni giving. A study of pharmacy student graduates found that giving in the first year after graduation increased after implementing a senior class gift programme (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Campus engagement and experiences, in addition to perceived institutional quality, may also play a role (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Experts suggest understanding student giving is critical for two main reasons. First, it provides insight into future alumni giving patterns (Freeman, 2015). Second, it occurs when students' attachment to their alma mater is under development (Freeland, 2015). A 2015 study investigating factors associated with student pharmacist philanthropy found that implementing a senior class gift programme increased the number of students who gave to the institution one-year post-graduation (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). However, no long-term data about alumni donations were provided (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015).

Better insight into the philanthropic perceptions of students may prove invaluable to HPE programmes, including pharmacy programmes, looking to promote and educate students on related initiatives. Currently, little data describes graduate students' philanthropic perceptions and experiences of medical, pharmacy, and health professions. This study aims to examine factors affecting HPE student perceptions and expectations of philanthropy.

Methods

Survey design

A cross-sectional, electronic, three-part survey was then created using Qualtrics. This survey was intended for all students enrolled at the Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED). To validate the survey, it was piloted by a group of university students and personnel within the University Advancement Office, and feedback was used to improve the face validity of the survey. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were anonymous.

Consent to participate in the study was completed via clicking a confirmation link. At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked whether the respondents were a student actively enrolled at the university. If the respondents selected "No," the survey ended. The first part of the survey gathered student demographic information, including age, gender, college affiliation, employment status, if the respondent had received a scholarship from the university, active

membership status within university student organisations, and leadership status within university student organisations. The second section was a questionnaire assessing student perceptions and expectations of philanthropy. Participants were asked to rate four statements on a scale ranging from one to five, with one indicating strongly disagree and five indicating strongly agree. The third section determined student experiences with philanthropy and included questions about volunteerism and monetary donations to their undergraduate and high school alma maters. A free text section was included for students to identify the frequency with which the respondents make these contributions. An open response section was included at the end of the survey to obtain qualitative feedback, and these comments were summarised.

Students in the College of Pharmacy, College of Medicine, and College of Graduate Studies were emailed with detailed information regarding the study, including risks and benefits associated with participating, and a hyperlink to complete the survey. Student emails were available via the university database. Survey instructions specified that only actively enrolled students should complete the survey. Surveys were distributed via email on April 19, 2021. A reminder email was sent after one week. The survey remained open until June 30, 2021. This study was approved as exempt research by the NEOMED Institutional Review Board (Study #21-010).

Statistical analysis

Survey data were imported into SPSSv25.0 software (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY) and summarised using frequencies and percentages. Associations between participant characteristics and ordinal survey responses were determined via Kendall's tau exact tests. All statistical testing was two-sided, with $p < 0.05$ considered statistically significant.

Results

The survey was sent to 965 students, and 139 students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 14.4%. Respondent demographics are detailed in Table I. No significant associations were uncovered between philanthropic perceptions and expectations and the following demographics: college affiliation (medicine, pharmacy, or graduate studies), scholarship status, active membership status within a university student organisation, and leadership status within a university student organisation.

Table I: Respondent demographics

Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Male	40 (29)
Female	92 (66)
Non-binary	4 (2.9)
Prefer to not answer	3 (2.1)
Age (years)	
20-25	95 (69)
26-30	34 (24)
31-35	8 (5.7)
Prefer to not answer	2 (1.3)
College affiliation	
Medicine	81 (58.3)
Pharmacy	53 (38.1)
Graduate studies	5 (3.6)
Employment status	
Yes	65 (46.8)
No	69 (49.6)
Prefer to not answer	5 (3.6)
Scholarship recipient	
Yes	64 (46)
No	73 (52.7)
Prefer to not answer	2 (1.3)
Is active within a student organisation	
Yes	122 (87.8)
No	15 (10.9)
Prefer to not answer	2 (1.3)
Holds a leadership position within a student organisation	
Yes	120 (86.5)
No	17 (12.2)
Prefer to not answer	2 (1.3)

Twenty percent of respondents volunteered at their high school alma mater, and 18% volunteered at their undergraduate alma mater. Fewer students donated money to these institutions, with 3% donating to their high school alma mater and 6% to their undergraduate alma mater. Table II details the frequency of these contributions. Philanthropic perceptions and expectations are detailed in Figure 1. Fifty-six percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that contributions to their alma mater make a difference. Fifty-seven percent indicated that the respondents intend to contribute or volunteer time to the university as alumni. Forty percent of respondents indicated that

the respondents intend to make monetary contributions to the university as alumni. Fifty-five percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the respondents would participate in a student-giving programme.

Table II: Frequency of contributions to alma maters

Type of contribution	Frequency	n (%)
Monetary contribution to high school alma mater	Never	135 (97.1)
	One time	1 (0.7)
	Yearly	3 (2.2)
Monetary contribution to undergraduate alma mater	Never	131 (94.4)
	One time	1 (0.7)
	Biannually	1 (0.7)
	Occasionally	5 (3.5)
	Yearly	1 (0.7)
Volunteer contribution at high school alma mater	Never	111 (79.8)
	One time	1 (0.7)
	Weekly	1 (0.7)
	Monthly	6 (4.5)
	Yearly	16 (11.5)
	Unspecified	4 (2.8)
Volunteer contribution at undergraduate alma mater	Never	114 (82)
	One time	1 (0.7)
	Weekly	1 (0.7)
	Monthly	4 (2.8)
	Yearly	12 (8.8)
	Unspecified	7 (5)
	Unspecified	4 (2.8)

Only two characteristics were significantly associated with any of the philanthropic statements. Students who donated money to their undergraduate institution or high school alma mater were more agreeable with the statement, "I believe contributions to my alma mater make a difference" ($p = 0.03$). Students who volunteered at their undergraduate institution or high school alma mater were more agreeable with the statement "I plan to contribute/volunteer time as an alumnus" ($p = 0.002$).

Twenty-four qualitative comments were submitted. From these, a common theme pertained to students' resistance to participate in a student-giving programme, given their responsibility for large student loan debt. Eighty-three percent of the comments addressed this issue. Four responses (17%) centred on interest in giving but did not understand how to get involved with philanthropic initiatives.

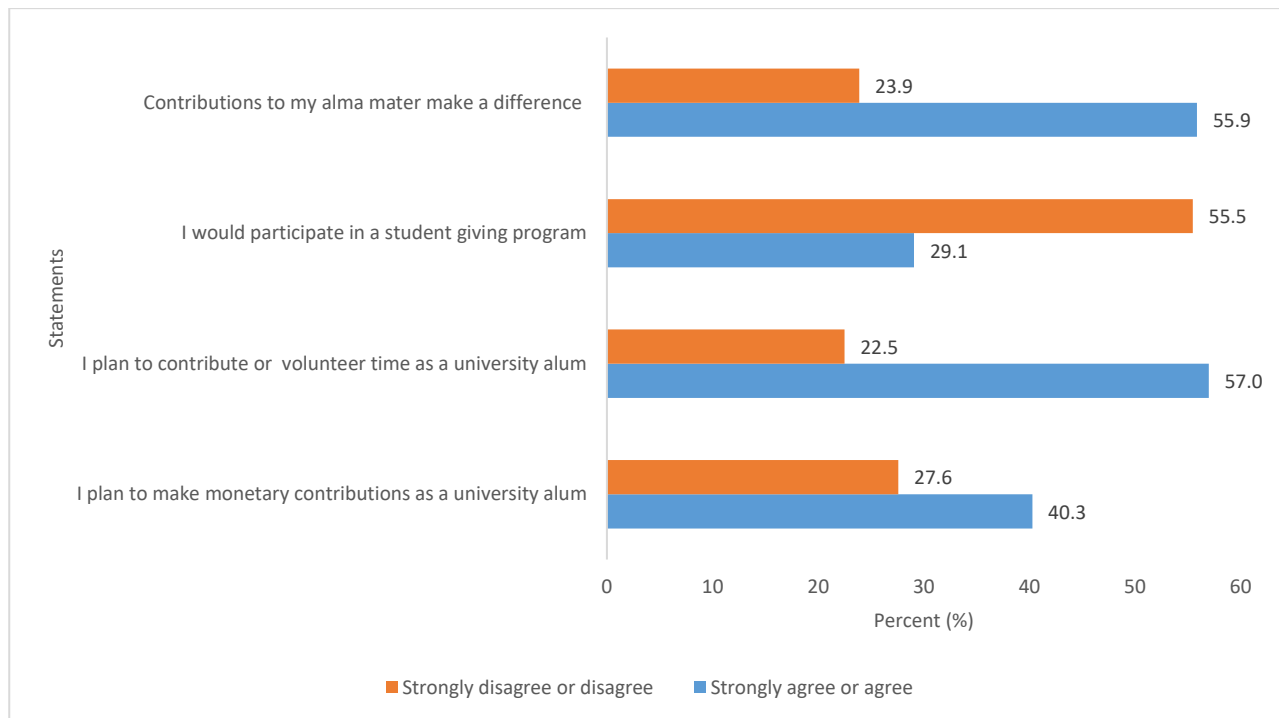


Figure 1: Philanthropy perceptions and expectations

Discussion

This study describes the philanthropic perceptions and expectations of HPE students at a health sciences university. The authors' findings suggest that students who engage in philanthropic endeavours while in an HPE programme are more likely to believe such contributions make a difference and plan to contribute as alumni. However, most students noted that they would be unwilling to participate in a student-giving programme at their current institution. To encourage and optimise alumni giving, experts recommend that institutions invest in programs promoting philanthropy and a community culture with current students (Freeland, 2013; Paradise, 2015). Below, the authors discuss factors that may impact HPE students' perceptions of and willingness to give in the context of this study's findings.

Ability to participate

Several factors may affect HPE students' perceptions of philanthropy and their ability to give, most notably the large financial burden students take to receive their education. This sentiment was expressed in the qualitative survey comments. For student pharmacists, the median tuition debt has been reported at \$170,000; for medical students, the median debt is approximately \$200,000 (AACP, 2021; AAMC, 2021). As tuition increases for many HPE students, this will be an important consideration for institutions looking to

implement such philanthropic programming and initiatives.

Knowledge of philanthropic endeavours

Early and longitudinal student education regarding the impact and importance of philanthropy could enhance eventual alumni giving. Such educational programming should detail how donations are utilised and impact current students (Perera & Fredrickson, 2022). It should also involve helping students make informed decisions regarding their philanthropic involvement (Perera & Fredrickson, 2022). Outside of financial contributions, students can be aware of opportunities to contribute time and talent to their institution through service and volunteer opportunities (Perera & Fredrickson, 2022). To date, there is limited literature describing such education within HPE settings.

CASE offers extensive resources for engaging students in philanthropy (CASE, 2023). Highlighted strategies include fostering early leadership through the development of Pre-Alumni Councils or similar types of student organisations; inviting students to attend alumni recognition events to network with alumni and become familiar with alumni engagement; and engaging student leaders in peer-led initiatives (Bennet, 2010; Bourbon, 2013; Barnett, 2019). Additional strategies may include senior gifts or other giving campaigns (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Student input and involvement in the development of programmes is encouraged. More

research is needed to determine best practices for employing these and other strategies within health profession education programmes.

Willingness to participate

Factors such as receiving a scholarship could impact a student's willingness to participate in philanthropic endeavours. Within this study, no significant association was found between students who received scholarships from the university and philanthropic statements related to making monetary donations and volunteering time as alumni. Data from a study of medical alumni reflect these findings, with scholarship recipients being no more likely to make donations as alumni compared to non-recipients (Meer & Rosen, 2012). Chisholm-Burns and Spivey (2015) also found no association between scholarship receipt and postgraduation giving among student pharmacists. Studies outside HPE have shown comparable results (Meer & Rosen, 2012). More research is needed to determine this association within HPE.

Active membership within student organisations provides opportunities to gain experience in service and fundraising events and participate in unique extra-curricular experiences. However, no significant association was found between students who are active members of university student organisations and philanthropic statements related to making monetary donations and volunteering time as alumni. A 2021 study at an undergraduate institution echoed these results (Lawrie, 2021). The author hypothesised that examining students' roles within these organisations may provide a better understanding of how this participation impacts alumni engagement. However, in this study, a leadership position within a university student organisation was not associated with philanthropic statements. It may be worthwhile to investigate the impact engagement within student organisations further has on alumni giving.

A sense of belonging

Professional identity has been defined as *"the attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs, and skills shared with others within a professional group"* (Matthews *et al.*, 2019). In recent years, more of an intentional focus has been placed on pharmacy and medical students' professional identity formation (PIF) (Janke *et al.*, 2021; Findyartini *et al.*, 2022). Given that identity is *"a key determinant of the scope and nature of an individual's work and prioritisation of their roles"*, it stands to reason that PIF initiatives could make significant impacts on student and alumni philanthropic efforts (Janke *et al.*, 2021). While PIF may indirectly help via broadly developing a value-based professional identity, educators could also promote the development of an *"alumni role identity"*

among current students and, ultimately, a strong sense of belonging among graduates.

Sense of belonging has been defined as a psychological factor measuring the subjective feelings of connectedness or cohesion to the institution and campus community, with *"belongingness"* seen as crucial to an individual's growth and existence within a community (Drenzer *et al.*, 2020). Utilising the sense of belonging construct may be a useful means of connecting a student's PIF during their time in HPE programmes and philanthropic giving with the institution post-graduation. In the same way PIF results in health professionals feeling like *"a real part of the profession"*, a sense of belonging would have HPE alumni view themselves *"as a real part of the institution"* (Drenzer *et al.*, 2020). Challenges exist in developing professional identity among HPE students, especially in an era of workplace burnout (Dee *et al.*, 2022). By extension, this may impact their sense of belonging as HPE alumni. Research into this area would greatly benefit HPE institutions.

Strengths, limitations, and recommendations

The strengths of this study include its novel investigation of the philanthropic perceptions and expectations of a broad range of HPE students. This study also determined associations between philanthropic perceptions and demographic factors such as employment and leadership status within student organisations. However, this dataset was limited by a low response rate. Due to this, additional associations may not have been uncovered. The low response rate could be due to survey fatigue among students, as it was administered at the end of the academic year. Additionally, the study has limited generalisability, as it was conducted at one health sciences university. Finally, this survey did not address all potential factors influencing students' perceptions and expectations of philanthropy, including living expenses, parental financial support, parenteral giving history to the institution, and overall educational experiences. Despite these limitations, the authors feel this study provides a useful starting point for future research and suggests more widespread studies be conducted.

The authors recommend that future studies be conducted at a multi-institutional or nationwide scale to determine trends better, and researchers may also choose to investigate factors influencing students' perceptions of philanthropy not assessed in this study, such as educational experiences and living expenses. Studies investigating the philanthropic perceptions of HPE alumni and their actual giving patterns would also be beneficial.

Conclusion

Within HPE, more research is needed to determine factors that correlate with the student giving and student perceptions of philanthropy, including monetary donations and service. Such findings may assist with determining best practices to engage and educate HPE students on philanthropy and philanthropic initiatives.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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