

Give 5 Gives Back:

Assessment of a New Civic Matchmaking Program for Older Adults

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Abstract

This study assessed participants' responses to the Give 5 Program, a civic matchmaking program where volunteers learn about and are encouraged to volunteer at local nonprofits. Participants were also asked general questions about successful aging. Of the 83 respondents, who were overwhelmingly positive about the program, 95% had recommended it to others, 81% were volunteering at four hours per week on average, and 57% had given money to one or more agencies. Respondents said the most important characteristics to successful aging were having a purpose, positive interactions with others, good health, the opportunity for personal growth, self-acceptance, and staying active. They said they were aging successfully and perceived a strong link between successful aging and volunteerism. The survey results strongly supported continuing the program, which benefits the community as well as the participants.

Keywords: Older adults; Aging; Successful aging; Volunteering; Civic matchmaking.

Introduction

There has been growing interest in the concept of successful aging and well being in later life as the number of older adults continues to climb during this “graying of America.”

Communities have begun to focus on how to harness the resources of older adults who are entering their retirement years, not just to benefit the community but also with a concern for helping these older adults continue to feel integrated and valued by the broader society.

The purpose of this study was to assess whether there were benefits for retired individuals participating in the Give 5 Program in Springfield, Missouri. This program introduces retired individuals to agencies that wish to recruit volunteers. This research explores the participants’ perceptions of the Give 5 experience, the meanings that these older adults attach to the idea of successful aging, and what they perceive to be the essential characteristics of aging well. Since the Give 5 Program is about connecting older adults to volunteer opportunities, this study also examines perceived links between successful aging and volunteerism.

The following video link (<http://www.ejournalofpublicaffairs.org/video-gallery/>) describes the Give 5 program in detail. Briefly, Give 5 matches participants—principally baby boomer retirees aged 60 or older—with volunteer opportunities in nonprofit organizations in Springfield, Missouri. Over five program days, one day per week from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, classmates meet, socialize, learn about their community, then board a shuttle to visit 23 different nonprofit organizations over the five-week period. Once participants learn how the nonprofit organizations operate and what volunteer positions are needed, they are encouraged to volunteer their time—at least five volunteer hours per month—to one or more of these organizations. In the program’s first year, organizers estimate that Give 5 participants contributed an estimated \$300,000 in time value to area nonprofit organizations. As of June 2019, eight classes had participated in the program. This paper presents an assessment of the first five Give 5 classes.

Methods

This study, conducted in 2019, sought to identify the meanings older people attach to successful aging, links between successful aging and volunteerism, and perceptions of their experience going through the Give 5 Program. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered through an online survey sent to all the participants in classes one through five (each class had from 16 to 24 participants). Of the 98 people contacted, 83 completed the survey questionnaire for a response rate of 85%.

Individuals were sent an online survey questionnaire containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions which took approximately 25 minutes to complete. Respondents were asked questions which captured their understanding of successful aging, whether or not they perceived themselves to be aging successfully, perceptions of links between successful aging and volunteerism, and perceptions of the Give 5 Program and its impact on their knowledge of community needs, sense of connection to the community, level of social interaction, empathy for under-resourced individuals, trust in nonprofit agencies, donations to charitable organizations, and at which agencies they volunteer. Qualitative data were coded by two independent reviewers who identified categories for each question and then assigned responses across those various categories. After independent coding of hundreds of responses, the reviewers obtained an inter-rater agreement rate of 95%. In a subsequent meeting, the reviewers went over the data together, focusing on where there had been disagreement, and resolved all differences in the coding of responses.

Sample Characteristics

For the 75 participants for whom complete demographic information is available, 27 were men and 48 were women. Most (31) were in the 65 to 69 age range; one was 55 to 59, 13

were 60 to 64, 19 were 70 to 75, 10 were older than 75, and one answer was unclear. Seventy respondents were white, one was Hispanic, one was Asian, and three preferred not to answer. The majority (44) were married or in a domestic partnership, 16 were widowed, 13 were divorced, and two were single, never married. Most (40) had lived in the area more than 30 years; five had lived in the area 20 to 29 years, 15 lived in the area 10 to 19 years, and 15 lived here nine years or less. Almost all (68) were retired, three worked less than 40 hours and one at least 40 hours per week; two were not employed and not looking, but one was not employed and looking for work.

In general, this was a well-educated, fairly well-off group of individuals. Eleven were high school graduates, five were trade or technical graduates, five had associate degrees, 22 had bachelors degrees, and 32 held graduate degrees. Most were homeowners (62), eight rented, and five preferred not to answer. While 24 respondents preferred not to answer the income question, five reported having an income between \$10,000 and \$24,999; eight between \$25,000 and \$49,999; 17 between \$50,000 and \$74,999; 10 between \$75,000 and \$99,999; four between \$100,000 and \$124,999; two between \$125,000 and \$149,999; one between \$175,000 and \$199,999; and 4 at least \$200,000.

Results

Successful Aging

The first three questions dealt with successful aging, summarized in Table 1. The first question asked, “What characteristics do you think are necessary to experience successful aging?” Although respondents’ answers varied, definite patterns emerged.

The largest category of responses was maintaining a sense of purpose, which involves having goals, making a contribution, and feeling that there is overall worth to one’s life. This

was mentioned by 60.2% of the respondents. Comments frequently centered on making a difference, giving back to the community, and feeling useful. The following quotes help to illustrate the range of responses: “Contribute time and attributes to the community. Make a difference,” “Volunteering helps you give back to the community,” “Meaningful work is the crux of it, even if that’s just taking care of grandkids,” and “A person has to have a purpose or a reason to get up in the morning.”

Table 1

Characteristics Necessary for Successful Aging

Category	Number of unique responses per respondent (N=265)	Percent of respondents (N=83) mentioning this category
Purpose	50	60.2
Positive Interactions	47	56.6
Health	43	51.8
Personal Growth	34	42.2
Self-Acceptance	25	30.1
Staying Active	24	28.9
Autonomy	10	12.0
Environmental Mastery	10	12.0
Faith	8	9.6
Finances	8	9.6
Staying Socially Active	3	3.6
Hobbies	2	2.4

The second largest category of responses for successful aging was positive interactions with others. This category stressed the importance of connections with others and staying involved with the broader community and was mentioned by 56.6% of respondents. Comments focused on friendships, contact with family, and meaningful relationships: “It’s important to have good friendships and meaningful connections with others,” “People to interact with. Staying in close touch with family,” and “Spending time socially with friends and family. Sharing our wisdom, education, and life experiences with those who are interested. I want meaningful and enjoyable social interaction.”

The next largest category was health, feeling that one is in reasonably good physical and mental condition. This was mentioned by 51.8% of respondents. In this category, respondents often commented on staying active, nutrition and exercise, and general statements about the importance of good health, as illustrated by the following comments: “Keeping an active body,” “Eating right and exercise doesn’t hurt,” and “Stay as healthy as possible.”

The next category was personal growth, mentioned by 42.2% of respondents. Respondents commented on learning new things and a desire to grow and develop intellectually: “Try to learn something new as often as you can. Volunteering is a way to keep active and work your brain!” “Having a desire to keep learning and exploring new interests and/or exploring long time interests,” and “I think a person has to keep a young mind and look forward to the future but live in the present and use your past as a reference.”

Self-acceptance, which refers to accepting one’s condition and circumstances and being at peace with oneself, was mentioned by 30.1% of the respondents. Comments referred to general acceptance, making adjustments, and feeling confidence with the aging process. The following quotes illustrate this category: “I accept where I am in life. Feeling comfortable in

your own skin,” “Enjoy each new stage as it comes. Appreciate that some physical and mental declines are natural,” and “To be happy with your life. Foster resilience as life changes.”

The final category to be presented here was staying active and was mentioned by 28.9%. While the comments varied in this category, the most frequent comment was on the general importance of being active with no further specification: “Stay busy,” “I am very active,” and “I am physically and socially active.”

Other categories that surfaced were environmental mastery or being able to manipulate one’s surroundings to meet daily needs, mentioned by 12%; autonomy or independence, mentioned by 12%; having enough income, mentioned by 9.6%; and faith or a spiritual life, mentioned by 9.6%.

Question 2 asked, “How would you rate your level of successful aging using the scale below?” The scale ranged from 1 (not aging successfully) to 7 (aging successfully). Of the 83 participants who answered this question, only 3 rated their aging as moderately unsuccessful, as can be seen in the chart below:

Table 2

How Successfully Are You Aging?

(1, not successfully; 7, very successfully)

Response (N=83)	Number	Percent
Aging very successfully (7)	29	34.9
Aging successfully (6 and 5)	44	53.0
Neither successfully/unsuccessfully (4)	7	8.4
Aging unsuccessfully (3 and 2)	3	3.6
Aging very unsuccessfully (1)	0	0

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their numerical answers to question 2. In general, their responses reflected the characteristics of successful aging identified by Fisher and Specht (1999). Because each open-ended response could reflect more than one element of successful aging, Table 2b below shows the number and percentage of respondents reflecting each element. The categories are arranged from most to least mentioned.

Table 2b

What Factors Contribute to Your Perception of Successful Aging?

Category	Number of unique responses per respondent (N=239)	Percent of respondents (N=83) mentioning this category
Health	44 total responses 34, positive; 10, negative	53.0 41.0 pos/12.0 neg
Self – Acceptance	42	50.6
Positive Interactions	34 total 32, positive; 2, negative	41.0 38.6 pos/2.4 neg
Purpose	28	33.7
Growth	23	27.7
Active	19	22.9
Volunteering	19	22.9
Faith	9	10.8
Environmental Mastery	8	9.6
Travel	7	8.4
Autonomy	3	3.6
Finances	3	3.6

The category most frequently mentioned for explaining respondents' ratings of successful aging is health. More than half the respondents (53.0%) mentioned health-related factors. Respondents who mentioned health positively said such things as "My good eating and sleeping habits contribute to my health," "I've been blessed with good health up to this point," and "I don't take much medication, don't have many aches and pains." Respondents with health problems said, "[I am] in constant pain," and "I have encountered several health problems and recently lost the vision in my left eye." Health problems were noted as preventing respondents from participating as much as they would like.

The next category most frequently mentioned, again by half the respondents (50.6%), was self-acceptance. Respondents said, "I am feeling more confident and comfortable in my aging process," "I am enjoying being retired," and "This year that [good health] has changed and typical signals of aging have manifested. I am adjusting to these changes slowly and deliberately, but my progress is taking time and deliberation." These responses show recognition of changes that come with aging and adjustment to those changes.

Having positive interactions with others was the next most-frequently-mentioned category. Respondents said, "I have lots of friends," "I also value my relationships and try to nurture them along," and "I have lots of family and acquaintances [with which] to interact frequently." For two respondents, this category contributed negatively: "My social circle is not quite as fulfilling as I'd like," and "family relationships are sometimes not real smooth."

Purpose was the next category mentioned most frequently. Respondents said, "[I] make a difference in the community," "I feel my contributions as a patient advocate have been very rewarding to me as well as my patients," and "[I] enjoy helping make our community a better place for all people."

This category was followed by personal growth. Respondents noted that “[I now have time] to engage in activities that are rewarding and interesting to me,” “[I] keep my brain active learning new things,” and “[I] am trying to grow myself into a better person.”

The categories of staying active and volunteering to one or more organizations each were mentioned by 22.9% of respondents. Comments included “I am physically and socially active,” “I try to keep active,” “I spend many hours volunteering,” and “I feel fulfilled in my volunteer work.”

The remaining five categories received fewer responses. Faith, environmental mastery, travel, autonomy and finances, while important to those mentioning them, did not contribute in a major way to successful aging for the overall group. The following comments typify those categories, respectively: “I strive to put God first in my life by honoring Him,” “[I have] a roof over my head, clothes on my back, and food in my stomach. . . What more could I want or need!”, “We are traveling internationally,” “I am independent and can get what I need to have a good life,” and “I’m financially secure.”

Question 3 encompassed 13 statements related to seven categories in previous research (Fisher & Specht, 1999; Fisher, Day & Collier, 1998; Fisher, 1995; Fisher, 1992; & Ryff, 1989) that have been found to be related to successful aging (purpose, positive interactions, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy, health, and environmental mastery). Participants were given two statements per category (with only one question related to health) and responded on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The means for two items comprising a category were averaged to produce the means in Table 3, which summarizes these responses by category, from the highest agreement level to the lowest. Clearly, these respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the statements. The lowest mean was for purpose, which at 5.80, was still well into the agreement range.

Table 3

Levels of agreement/disagreement regarding factors associated with successful aging

Category	Response Mean (N=83)	Range of Responses
Positive Interactions	6.31	2-7
Environmental Mastery	6.30	1-7
Autonomy	6.19	1-7
Health	6.16	1-7
Personal Growth	6.08	1-7
Self-Acceptance	6.01	1-7
Purpose	5.80	1-7

Link Between Volunteerism and Successful Aging

Question 4 asked whether there was a link between volunteerism and successful aging; respondents overwhelmingly agreed that there was (97%, n = 81). In the explanation of responses, the four categories that emerged most often were sense of purpose, self-acceptance, positive interactions with others, and personal growth, as shown in Table 4.

A sense of purpose was mentioned by 80.7% of the respondents with comments that emphasized a sense of contributing to others' well-being and sharing talents with others: "Everyone needs a purpose and helping others makes our community better," "Sharing gifts and talents with others gives meaning and purpose to your life," "Being of service to others keeps the vital energy of life flowing" and "You must be useful and needed by others. Volunteerism provides us with a purpose that we might not otherwise have and provides a means to give back to our community."

Table 4

Factors contributing to perceptions of the links between volunteerism and successful aging

Category	Number of unique responses by respondents (N=181)	Percent of respondents (N=83) mentioning this category
Purpose	67	80.7
Self - Acceptance	56	67.5
Positive Interactions	21	25.3
Growth	19	22.9
Distraction	5	6.0
Faith	4	4.8
Environmental Mastery	3	3.6
Autonomy	3	3.6
Active	2	2.4
Health	1	1.2

The next category was self-acceptance, mentioned by 67.5% of respondents, who emphasized a feeling of satisfaction, self-worth, and being happier. Representative comments include, “Giving back or paying it forward, volunteering triggers a feeling of general well-being and satisfaction,” “Keeping current with the needs of the community lends to your self-worth. I have volunteered all my life so to stop with this activity would be detrimental to myself and my perceived value,” and “If what you volunteer to do is satisfying, you’ll be happier.”

Positive interactions with others, the third category, was mentioned by 25.3% of respondents. Individuals mentioned keeping socially active, meeting new people, and making friends: “Volunteering keeps you social and gets you out in the world being with other people,”

“Volunteering lets you meet new people and make connections with others,” and “Working together as a group you can tackle and solve problems that otherwise may seem insurmountable. I like to volunteer and enjoy the friends I’ve made with those endeavors.”

The fourth category, personal growth, was mentioned by 22.9%. In this category, respondents commented on expanding horizons and learning new things: “Volunteering or just helping others gives a feeling of going beyond yourself. It gives you ideas you might not have thought of before,” and “Involvement as a volunteer expands your horizons and broadens your knowledge of people and situations. It offers personal growth and a sense of accomplishment.”

Responses Regarding the Give 5 Program

The survey asked questions designed to assess the effect, specifically, of the Give 5 Program on the respondents. Most questions were on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); some were yes/no questions. These are summarized in the discussion and tables that follow.

Respondents indicated that they enjoyed participating in Give 5 (average, 6.82, range 4 to 7). In an overwhelming endorsement of the program, 98.8% of respondents said they would recommend Give 5 to others, with only one person responding “maybe.” In addition, 95.2 % (N=79) actually have encouraged others to participate in the Give 5 Program or to volunteer their time. The majority, 63.9% (N=53), reported they had told 10 or more other people about the program; 13.3 % (N=11) had told between seven and nine people; 19.3% (N=16) had told between four and six people, and 3.6% had told one to three people. No one had failed to tell someone else about Give 5.

When asked whether they were volunteering with any organization(s) as a result of Give 5, 80.7% (N=67) said they were, at an average of 4.19 hours per week. Moreover, when asked if

they had donated money to one or more nonprofits as a result of Give 5, 55.6 (N=47) reported that they had. Table 5 summarizes the responses to several questions asking about specific effects of the Give 5 Program, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Respondents who reported volunteering were asked to what extent their volunteer work was similar to or different from what they had done in their paying careers prior to retirement. Responses, summarized in Table 6, next page, ranged from 1 (very dissimilar) to 7 (very similar).

Table 5

Levels of agreement/disagreement regarding Give 5 (1, strongly disagree; 7, strongly agree)

Question: To what extent has Give 5:	Response Mean (N=83)	Range of Responses
Increased my sense of responsibility to help improve the community	6.31	3-7
Made me feel more connected to the community.	6.11	2-7
Increased my knowledge of needs in the community.	6.66	3-7
Increased my empathy for under-resourced individuals in the community.	6.27	2-7
Increased my level of trust in the work of nonprofits in the community.	6.06	2-7
Increased my level of social interaction.	5.34	2-7
Provided information that was new to me.	5.46	3-7

Table 6

Degree of similarity between volunteer work and paid careers

Response (N=67)	Number	Percent
Very similar (7)	12	17.9
Similar (6 and 5)	17	25.4
Neither similar nor dissimilar (4)	12	17.9
Dissimilar (3 and 2)	18	26.9
Very dissimilar (1)	8	12.9

Table 7 reports responses regarding how the Give 5 volunteers believe their work affects the organizations for which they volunteer. Again, the scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a great extent or very meaningful)

Table 7

Effects of one's volunteer work on the organizations

Question	Response Mean (N=67)	Range of Responses
To what extent has the organization explained the impact of your work? (1, not at all; 7, to a great extent)	5.21	1-7
How meaningful is your work to the organization? (1, not at all meaningful; 7, very meaningful)	5.91	2-7

Summary and Discussion

The results of this study paint a clear picture. In terms of these individuals' aging experiences, and despite the challenges of daily life circumstances, they are aging very well. Over the last sixty years, prevailing stereotypes about older adults as frail, senile, self-involved, and disengaged have undermined a recognition of the value of older adults. As the number of

older adults grows both within and outside the United States, it is important that communities challenge the insidious aspects of these stereotypes and embrace the valuable resource that is available among its retirees.

The older adults in this study have once again validated the importance of a sense of purpose, positive interactions with others, self-acceptance, personal growth, staying active, and health as key factors contributing to successful aging. Their collective comments give voice to a deep desire to be engaged in the community to benefit themselves and, just as importantly, to feel needed by and useful to the broader society. These individuals sought out the Give 5 Program to learn more about their community and find ways that they could make a difference.

The study also demonstrates a clear link between volunteerism and successful aging. In later life, it is easy to become isolated due to widowhood, illness, or not feeling welcomed by younger members of society. Volunteerism is an avenue through which people can regain or maintain a sense of purpose and value, learn more about others in diverse circumstances, and make new friends as they work with others to solve the problems within a community.

The questions specifically addressing the Give 5 Program plainly demonstrate its effectiveness in meeting the goals of the program as well as benefiting those who participate in the program. The results in Table 5 show that participants perceived an increase in responsibility to the community, connection to the community, knowledge of community needs, empathy for underserved populations, trust of nonprofits, social interaction, and gained new information. In addition, participants were so moved by the experience that 95.2% encouraged others to go through the Give 5 experience and all of them encouraged others to engage in some form of volunteering. Moreover, participants gave not only of their time but also of their money to help area nonprofit agencies.

By the results of this study, the Give 5 Program is a resounding success. It encourages people to get involved in the community and provides opportunities and benefits to the older participants that will help them continue to age successfully.

While this study is representative only of the participants in the first five classes, there is little doubt that future classes will benefit in similar ways. The Give 5 Program can, and should, be marketed to other communities to harness the untapped potential of retired individuals who want to continue to be engaged and help improve their corner of the world. This is a program well suited to do just that.

Limitations

There are two principal areas of concern. The first involves the lack of racial and ethnic diversity of participants; only two who answered this question identified as non-Caucasian. While this reflects a general lack of diversity in Springfield, which was 88.7% Caucasian in the 2010 census, it is nevertheless important for Give 5 genuinely to represent the community and suggests modifications in recruiting potential Give 5 participants. The second is that, although the response rate of 85% is excellent, there is likely a pro-Give 5 bias among respondents. Hearing from the non-respondents would deepen our understanding of the impact of Give 5 on participants.

Future Research

This assessment has suggested several areas for future research. One important topic is to assess how the nonprofits perceive the Give 5 Program and the volunteers that come to them through the program. In addition, because good health was deemed so important to the ability to volunteer, observing how declining health impedes participant involvement would be useful, as

would understanding how a participants' health issues might be accommodated to keep them engaged. An important question to be explored is, *Is this a program only for relatively healthier older adults?* It is important to consider how can the program be designed so participants can continue to volunteer and reap the benefits from doing so if health declines. Finally, follow-up with graduates at regular intervals will also provide valuable longitudinal data on how lasting are the benefits from participating in the Give 5 Program.

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