Older Adults’ Attitudes Toward Virtual Volunteering During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
This study explored older adults’ technology use patterns and attitudes toward virtual volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 22-item survey was administered to 229 volunteers in the St. Louis region who tutor children through the Oasis Intergenerational Tutoring program. Although most respondents are familiar with technology and expressed that they are likely to volunteer virtually, their responses varied significantly by age, education, gender, income, and school districts. Some tutors expressed that virtual volunteering may eliminate barriers to in-person volunteering, while others were concerned with establishing a personal connection with students online. These findings suggest that tutors anticipate both benefits and challenges with virtual volunteering and that efforts to engage older adults during the pandemic should factor in prior use of technology and ensure that different subgroups are not marginalized.

Keywords
technology, volunteerism & civic engagement, intergenerational relations

Introduction
Volunteering is an important activity in the lives of many older adults, but many volunteer opportunities have disappeared with the COVID-19 pandemic (Seddighi et al., 2020). Stay-at-home orders and changes in operations for social services and other nonprofits have meant that many of the in-person volunteer roles filled by older adults are no longer active or older adults are concerned about continuing participation. This leaves a gap both in the lives of older adults and within the organizations that rely on volunteer assistance to achieve their mission.

In recent years, virtual volunteering has emerged as an extension and alternative to traditional volunteering (Conroy & Williams, 2014). Websites like VolunteerMatch and UN Volunteers allow people to connect with a variety of volunteer opportunities virtually (Mukherjee, 2011). Virtual volunteers tend to be more highly educated, highly skilled, and of higher socioeconomic status (Cravens & Ellis, 2014). Virtual volunteers may experience the same benefits as in-person volunteering, including a sense of purpose (Mukherjee, 2010) and the development of social ties (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Virtual volunteering may also be empowering to individuals who are not able to commit to in-person volunteering because of psychological, physical, or geographical barriers (Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018). At the same time, an age-based digital divide exists, in which older adults are less likely to access digital technologies than younger people (Seifert et al., 2020).

Little research exists on older adults’ attitudes toward virtual volunteering when traditional forms of engagement are severely limited and volunteers are asked to switch to online platforms. To address this gap, this research surveyed current tutors with the Oasis Intergenerational Tutoring program, which pairs older volunteers with elementary children in Grades K–3. Oasis is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting healthy aging. Its tutoring program has been in operation since 1989 and more than 100,000 Oasis volunteers have tutored over 444,000 children across the United States. Benefits to both older volunteers and students have been documented in intergenerational tutoring programs.
### Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Surveyed School Districts and Education of Survey Respondents by School District.

| School district   | 2019 NCES locale framework | Race/ethnicity | Population | Households with internet | Families below poverty level | Education of survey respondents |
|-------------------|----------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Clayton           | Large suburb               | 74% White, 7% Black, 13% Asian, 3% Hispanic/Latino | 18,826     | 91%                      | 4%                          | 50.0% Postgraduate, 50.0% College degree |
| Ferguson-Florissant | Large suburb               | 59% Black, 34% White, 3% Hispanic/Latino | 69,221     | 79.1%                    | 18.2%                       | 68.0% Postgraduate, 28.0% College degree, 4.0% High school |
| Mehlville         | Large suburb               | 93% White, 3% Black, 2% Asian, 2% Hispanic/Latino | 96,062     | 84.9%                    | 7.3%                        | 17.8% Postgraduate, 42.2% College degree, 28.9% Some college, 11.1% High school |
| Rockwood          | Fringe rural and large suburb | 88% White, 6% Asian, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Black | 117,633    | 91.4%                    | 1.9%                        | 38.8% Postgraduate, 42.9% College degree, 16.3% Some college, 2.0% High school |
| St. Charles       | Small city and large suburb | 83% White, 7% Black, 5% Hispanic/Latino | 53,743     | 82.9%                    | 11.5%                       | 26.9% Postgraduate, 43.3% College degree, 19.4% Some college, 10.4% High school |
| East St. Louis    | Large suburb               | 5% White, 92% Black, 2% Hispanic/Latino | 37,008     | 43.2%                    | 51.7%                       | 25.0% Postgraduate, 75.0% Some college |
| Northwest         | Large suburb               | 94% White, 2% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Asian | 45,048     | 81.7%                    | 15.0%                       | 18.2% Postgraduate, 27.3% College degree, 36.4% Some college, 18.2% High school |

Note. Data compiled from the NCES (2020). NCES = National Center for Education Statistics.

(Fried et al., 2013; Kerz et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2012). When in-person tutoring was halted in the spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, Oasis began to experiment with virtual tutoring options. Adopting a human capital perspective, we designed survey questions to test the association between individual resources, such as education and income, and formal volunteering (McNamara & Gonzales, 2011). To inform program development, we ask the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are Oasis tutors’ usage of and attitudes toward technology and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Skype?

**Research Question 2:** What are tutors’ preferences for virtual versus in-person tutoring?

**Research Question 3:** What are tutors’ perceived challenges and opportunities for virtual tutoring during the pandemic?

**Research Question 4:** How do tutors feel about in-person tutoring during the pandemic, and what are ways to make in-person tutoring safer?

### Method

Oasis tutors in seven Missouri school districts (Clayton, East St. Louis, Ferguson-Florissant, Mehlville, Northwest, Rockwood, and St. Charles) were invited to participate in the present study. As Table 1 shows, these school districts represent variations in internet access, socioeconomic status, and geography. Tutors were contacted by email (n = 451) and mail (n = 56) and invited to complete a survey online, by phone, or by mail. Depending on the type of survey selected, participants provided either written consent or verbal consent over the phone, and both types of consent were documented on an online survey platform. A total of 229 tutors completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 45%. Study protocols were approved by the Washington University in St. Louis Institutional Review Board.

The survey had a total of 22 questions, including both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The questions were developed using prior research and tested for comprehensibility. Closed-ended questions about technology use were adapted from the National Health and Aging Trends Study, the Health and Retirement Study 2012 Core Technology Use Module, and surveys from the Pew Research Center (Vogels et al., 2020). Through open-ended questions, the participants expressed their attitudes on the challenges and benefits of virtual tutoring. Themes from these responses were identified by the lead author, and then reviewed and finalized with the second author. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to test for associations between attitudes and demographics. Effect sizes were reported using Cramer’s $V$, and post hoc
residual analyses were made using the Bonferroni adjustment (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000). Table 3 presents these associations and describes the group proportions that were significantly larger or smaller than expected.

**Results**

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The majority of respondents were between ages 71 and 80 (45.9%) and ages 61 and 70 (34.1%), had a college or postgraduate degree (76.4%), and were not working or retired (88.6%). Most respondents (79.3%) have experience with multiple technological devices, and as Table 3 shows, a larger proportion of these respondents were female and had an education level greater than high school (Bonferroni post hoc $p < .05$). Difficulty of computer use was significantly associated with age, education, and income (Bonferroni post hoc $p < .05$), and 22.8% of respondents feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable when using the internet. Video conferencing software was not used before by 14.0% of the respondents, the top reasons being the following: prefer other forms of communication (48.4%), find it too difficult to keep up with technological changes (19.4%), or do not have a need for it (16.1%). Furthermore, 50.0% of respondents who have not used video conferencing software before indicated that they are not interested in trying such technologies.

Respondents prefer in-person tutoring (73.5%) or a mix of both virtual and in-person tutoring (17.7%) over virtual-only tutoring (5.8%). When asked about the likelihood of participating in a virtual tutoring program, 60.6% of the participants responded that they were somewhat likely or very likely to participate. However, the likelihood of participating online varied by school district ($\chi^2 = 21.92, p < .05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.33$), from a low of 42.6% of tutors in the Rockwood School District to a high of 96.0% of tutors in the Clayton School District (Bonferroni post hoc $p < .05$; see Table 3). The Clayton School District, which is located in a suburban area that is partly urban, has on average more highly educated tutors than tutors in the Rockwood School District, which is a suburban area that is partly rural (Table 1). More than three quarters of respondents (75.7%) considered virtual tutoring beneficial but not a replacement for in-person tutoring. Furthermore, a larger than expected proportion of male respondents (24.2%) considered virtual tutoring as not beneficial at all (Bonferroni post hoc $p < .05$).

If tutoring is in-person and COVID-19 remains an issue, nearly half of the respondents (49.5%) would be moderately or extremely concerned, but only 21.7% would be concerned about resources and support from Oasis. Respondents suggested that in-person tutoring would be safer with personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves, a dedicated tutoring space to minimize contact with children and school staff, and clear safety protocols and instructions.

Open-ended questions revealed that respondents felt virtual tutoring would allow them to tutor in the comfort of their homes while maintaining a one-on-one relationship with their students. Tutors believed that continued tutoring would increase students’ academic performance and proficiency with technology. Respondents also voiced that virtual tutoring may be more equitable because it eliminates such barriers to in-person tutoring as commuting to schools and inclement weather. However, tutors were also concerned that virtual tutoring would not allow them to establish a personal connection with their students or carry out hands-on activities on an online platform. Finally, the respondents expressed that they lacked the training to tutor remotely and worried about keeping students attentive and engaged.
Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on virtual volunteering by capturing a very unique time in our history—when most in-person volunteering in schools is suspended and virtual programs are being developed as alternatives. This study looked within a group of older adults who have already self-selected into volunteer roles and tend to have more human capital, such as technological proficiency, than non-volunteers (McNamara & Gonzales, 2011). Despite being a comparatively higher resourced group, many participants were uncertain about using technology to tutor children, which could translate to a loss of potential tutors. These findings suggest that attention to the “digital divide” should not be solely focused on differential access to technology. Rather, we also need to understand linkages between digital competence and productive activities such as virtual volunteering when access is less of an issue.

As a starting point, our findings by age, education, gender, race, income, and school district highlight potential subgroups that may be unable or unwilling to fully participate in virtual tutoring. Consistent with a human capital perspective, tutors who expressed a lower likelihood of participating virtually had lower educational levels and the least experience with video conferencing technology. Increase in age and lower income were expectedly associated with a decline in technological proficiency. Perhaps in contrast to sex-role stereotypes (Selwyn et al., 2003), older females were more technologically proficient than males in our sample. This finding reminds us that we should not make assumptions about technology use when reaching out to older adults. Despite our results having fewer significant variations by school district than expected, our data on school districts nevertheless map out geographical and racial inequities such as differential access to internet. For example, East St. Louis School District, which is predominantly Black, has the lowest proportion of households with access to broadband internet (Table 1). Attending to the unique contexts of tutors and school districts will be essential for promoting equity and equal participation.

When in-person tutoring is able to resume, our results suggest that organizational staff should provide clear protocols for ensuring safe interactions with children. However, recognizing that some older adults may be reluctant to return to in-person tutoring, virtual volunteering may be a viable alternative. Our findings indicate that a successful transition would be contingent on training volunteers on both the technological and pedagogical aspects of virtual tutoring. Support or funding for hardware and equipment will also be an important resource for volunteers. Given the promise for virtual volunteering to overcome mobility and distance issues, organizations may also consider a hybrid model of both virtual and in-person volunteering to increase inclusiveness of participation.

Several limitations need to be considered. First, the use of a convenience sample of volunteers in one region of Missouri means that the generalizability of our findings is limited.

### Table 3. Tests of Associations Between Demographics and Attitudes Toward Technology and Tutoring.

| Survey response                    | Demographics | \( \chi^2 \) (Cramer’s V) |
|------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Virtual tutoring not beneficial    | School district: 11.09 | Age: 7.3 | Education: 4.09 | Gender: 8.35* (0.20) Male (24.2%) (+) Female (8.3%) (−) | Race: 56.70* (0.38) White (2.2%) (−) | Income: 8.51 |
| Number of technology devices       | 9.57 | 20.39 | 31.72* (0.21) High school (50.0%) (−) | 14.75* (0.25) Male (58.3%) (−) Female (82.9%) (+) | 2.5 | 74.15* (0.40) US$15k–US$25k (40.0%) (−) |
| Likely to tutor virtually          | 21.92* (0.33) Clayton (96.0%) (+) Rockwood (42.6%) (−) | 6.03 | 1.95 | 0.99 | 6.52 | 5.52 |
| Difficulty of computer use         | 2.84 | 11.56* (0.23) Age 81–90 (25.0%) (+) | 10.67* (0.22) High school (21.4%) (+) | 0.43 | 0.9 | 24.82* (0.40) <US$15k (100.0%) (+) |
| Concern for oasis resources for virtual tutoring | 9.97 | 8.3 | 2.66 | 1.64 | 4.75 | 9.08 |
| Concern for in-person tutoring     | 8.34 | 6.99 | 8.18 | 3.45 | 2.03 | 6.58 |
| Uncomfortable using internet       | 14.23 | 10.79 | 8.95 | 0.13 | 5.39 | 39.00* (0.29) <US$15k (100.0%) (+) |

Note. \( \chi^2 \) = Pearson’s chi-square; +/− = proportion is larger/smaller than expected (Bonferroni post hoc \( p < .05 \)).

\* \( p < .05 \).
Second, self-selection bias is common in online survey research (Wright, 2005), and despite offering the survey online, by mail, and by phone, it is likely that our sample excluded those who are less technologically savvy. Finally, our findings should be interpreted in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created broad impacts on the decisions and attitudes of volunteers and organizations alike. At another time in history, virtual volunteering may mean something different.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the importance of ensuring equity in a virtual tutoring environment. Marginalization of certain subgroups by age, income, education, and geography may be reinforced by the inability to fully participate in virtual tutoring. On the contrary, wider participation may be achieved when geographic or disability barriers are eliminated. Further research is needed to understand who is included and who is excluded from civic engagement in a virtual environment and to assess retention rates and outcomes for both tutors and children alike. Most likely, post-COVID-19 volunteering opportunities will include both in-person and virtual opportunities for older adults.

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