Belonging from a Distance: Digital Volunteering in Romanian Universities

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Abstract

Digital volunteering has become an increasingly relevant form of student engagement in higher education, particularly as universities integrate hybrid and online modes of collaboration. This study examines how digital volunteering contributes to the development of student belonging in Romanian universities, using the Babeș-Bolyai University (UBB) as a case study. Grounded in Strayhorn's (2018) conceptualization of belonging as the experience of feeling accepted, valued, and included within the academic community, and informed by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), the research explores how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported through digitally mediated volunteer roles. Additionally, the study draws on recent scholarship on networked belonging and online student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Veletsianos, 2020) to understand how collaborative digital spaces can foster meaningful connection. Employing a mixed-methods design - combining a quantitative survey of student volunteers with semi-structured interviews - the findings indicate that digital volunteering can strengthen institutional belonging when communication is continuous, purpose is shared, and contributions are socially recognized. The study highlights implications for university engagement strategies and the design of inclusive volunteer programs in digitally networked academic environments.

Keywords

Digital volunteering, higher education, student belonging, institutional identity.