

Challenges and Retention Strategies for University Graduates in the Western China Volunteer Service Program: Empirical Evidence from a Five-Year Sichuan Cohort

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Abstract: The Western China Volunteer Service Program is, in essence, a dual-purpose policy tool: it directs human resources while simultaneously promoting regional development. In practice, it aligns with broader national agendas—rural revitalization, coordinated regional growth, and even technological innovation and border stability—by channelling recent graduates into western regions. Our analysis draws on a five-year panel dataset (2019–2024) collected from volunteers affiliated with Sichuan University of Science and Engineering. Specifically, we looked at four interconnected dimensions: why graduates chose to enrol, what they expected to gain from the experience, how they envisioned their subsequent careers, and what practical hurdles they actually faced during service. One recurring pattern we observed was a notable gap between pre-service ideals and on-the-ground realities. To address this misalignment, we propose a regionally adapted talent management framework—one centred not simply on recruitment, but on long-term retention and meaningful career development. We hope these findings will offer useful reference points for policymakers, particularly as graduate employment pressures mount and the western region's talent pool requires more sustainable support over time.

Keywords: Western China Volunteer Service Program; Graduate Career Preferences; Volunteer Turnover and Retention; Regional Talent Systems; Survey-Based Empirical Analysis.

1. Chapter 1 Problem Analysis: Exploring New Pathways for Youth Employment Amid Shifting Times

China has witnessed a sustained increase in university graduate numbers over recent years, with successive cohorts reaching historic peaks. The simultaneous presence of recruitment difficulties and delayed employment transitions has attracted considerable academic and policy attention [1]. According to official projections from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the national graduate cohort for 2024 was estimated at 11.79 million, with the 2025 figure projected to reach 12.22 million—and this upward trajectory is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Against the macro backdrop of economic slowdown, shrinking market demand, and weakened recruitment willingness among enterprises, the supply side of the job market has been jointly intensified pressure[2].

Graduates today are entering a job market where supply regularly outstrips demand—and that imbalance, in turn, is pushing them toward a wider range of career options, many of which are decidedly more pragmatic than their predecessors might have considered.

On April 23, 2024, General Secretary Xi Jinping presided over a forum on advancing the Development of Western China in the New Era in Chongqing and delivered an important speech. A key policy priority running through China's western development strategy—as articulated by the CPC Central Committee—has been sustained implementation over time. That strategy, at its core, envisions a development

model that balances three interlocking goals: ecological protection on a substantial scale, further opening-up of the region, and a shift toward higher-quality economic and social progress.

Beyond its immediate policy objectives, this strategy is also meant to strengthen the competitiveness of regional economies over the longer haul, and to make their growth patterns more sustainable. Turning to program participation, we see a clear upward drift in volunteer enrollment since 2021—though not without some year-to-year wobbles. By 2024, official figures put total participation at 83,000, which represents a doubling over four successive years. That growth is hardly accidental; it mirrors the central government's sustained emphasis on developing the mid-western belt, and it is, in turn, feeding back into the career calculations of today's graduating cohorts. What makes this interplay particularly interesting is that it cuts across both aggregate policy directions and individual decision-making. In both arenas, the Western Program itself has been adapting incrementally, and the evolving profile of its volunteer pool is both a driver and a reflection of that adaptation.

Set against this broader policy landscape, the College Graduate Volunteer Service Program for Western China has taken on considerably greater weight over time. Its stated rationale is twofold: supporting the state's western development strategy, while simultaneously easing the employment bottlenecks facing new graduates. Historically, one might draw a loose parallel with the Down to the Countryside Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s—that earlier campaign was also driven by urban job pressures and a desire to jump-start rural progress. Yet the current Program,

since its inception in 2003, has funnelled several hundred thousand university leavers into grassroots positions across the central and western regions. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is how the Program has changed in character. It no longer operates merely as a top-down mechanism for redistributing human capital; rather, it has

gradually become a more complex social space—one in which young participants confront career trade-offs, seek personal development, negotiate their values against real-world constraints, and, in doing so, produce tangible outcomes that sit at the crossroads of national strategy and individual aspiration [3].



Figure 1. Volunteer Enrollment in the Western China Volunteer Service Program, 2021–2025

For the students who sign up, the Program offers something quite specific: a sustained grassroots pathway, particularly appealing to those with a genuine interest in community-level work. Zooming out, however, it also serves a broader function—it provides a transitional space for young people moving out of higher education and into adult life. And that transition is rarely seamless; many struggle with the identity reorientation involved, not least because generational shifts in family expectations, career norms, and social roles often complicate the picture. What, then, makes the Program attractive enough to draw such numbers? In our view, the answer lies in a combination of tangible supports—policy-backed allowances and social security coverage—which give participants a degree of financial stability and peace of mind. Equally important, though, is the clearer career trajectory that the Program signals, including potential pathways into public sector or regional employment afterwards. Taken together, these practical and prospective benefits go a long way toward explaining why the Program continues to appeal to graduating cohorts year after year.

Career-wise, the Program offers volunteers more than just short-term experience. For instance, those who complete their service become eligible for tangible institutional incentives—including bonus points on civil service exams and an additional 10 points on the postgraduate entrance examination's preliminary round. These provisions, while seemingly modest in isolation, collectively open up meaningful room for volunteers to move forward into competitive graduate programmes or public-sector careers.

Yet limited systematic primary empirical evidence is currently available concerning volunteer cohorts, and there is a particular lack of thorough analyses grounded in theoretical frameworks of China's social transition and youth employment restructuring [4]. Based on online and offline surveys and interviews conducted over five years targeting serving and alumni volunteers of Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, together with relevant academic literature, this paper elaborates the mutual influence between the evolving functions of the Western Program—as an employment buffer anchor, venue for value realization, and capacity-forging furnace—and university students' career

planning. Focusing on the employment of this special group of grassroots service volunteers, this research strives to fully implement General Secretary Xi Jinping's important guidance on the Western Program. It aims to deliver practical suggestions for high-quality employment of young people in the new era who will strive to realize the blueprint of the 15th Five-Year Plan after building a moderately prosperous society in all respects.

2. Chapter 2 Research Design: Extracting and Summarizing Data Correlations between the Western Program and University Graduate Employment

This research adopts multi-dimensional research methods, including online and offline questionnaire surveys and on-site in-depth interviews. The author accessed the roster information of Sichuan University of Science and Engineering's Western Program volunteers from 2020 to 2025. By simple random sampling across different groups differentiated by gender, ethnicity, academic background, major, service location, post, and service duration, questionnaires and interviews were carried out with volunteers to gain preliminary perceptual understanding of their employment status. Drawing on volunteer service theories, the author designed the Questionnaire on Employment Status of Western Program Volunteers from Sichuan University of Science and Engineering. The questionnaire investigates volunteers' career goals, career values, and employability.

A total of 364 questionnaires were distributed to graduates from five cohorts (Classes 2021–2025), and 125 valid responses were collected, representing an effective response rate of 34%. Of all valid survey samples, male participants took a proportion of 35.2%, whereas female participants occupied 64.8%. Once potential response biases linked to gender predisposition are eliminated, female respondents form a minor majority [5].

Between July and September 2025, questionnaire surveys

were administered to graduates of Sichuan University of Science and Engineering who participated in the Western Program, resulting in a total of 125 valid research samples. Data cleansing, categorization and statistical analysis procedures were performed using SPSS software.

To explore individual employment decisions and adaptive conditions in greater depth, one-on-one intensive interviews were carried out with selected alumni volunteers engaged in

grassroots service across western China throughout the July to September 2025 research period. All interviewees were recruited via voluntary sampling principles. Every single interview maintained a consistent duration of 40 to 60 minutes. To strike a balance between open information disclosure and personal privacy protection, all participants were assigned anonymous codes following a unified structure of Number – Major – Career Objective.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

Code	Gender	Graduation year	Major	Career objective	Western Program Post	Employment Status
T1	Male	2024	Investment Studies	public sector recruitment	rural grassroots primary education instructor	/
T2	Female	2024	Public Administration	Government job track	Village-level support	/
T3	Female	2024	International Economics and Trade	Private sector	Rural governance staff	/
T4	Female	2024	Applied Mathematics	Teaching and data analysis	Rural governance staff	Teacher
T5	Female	2024	Fashion Design	Public sector exam	Rural governance staff	/
T6	Female	2025	Law	Extended service	Rural governance staff	/
T7	Female	2025	Law	Master's program	Rural development staff	/
T8	Female	2025	Law	Civil service exam	Village-level support	/

3. Chapter 3 Findings and Discussion: Who They Are, Where They Served, and Where They Went – Evidence from a Sichuan-Based Institutional Sample

The questionnaire data were sourced primarily from Sichuan Province, located in the central-western part of China. This geographic focus is narrower in scope than nationally representative surveys, and we acknowledge that such a regional concentration may introduce some degree of variation in the short-term employment choices made by volunteers originating from other parts of the country. That caveat aside, we believe the survey still captures a set of broader macro-level tendencies. Data cleaning and preliminary processing were completed by October 2025, which means our analysis reflects relatively current labor market conditions. The sample itself spans a range of disciplinary backgrounds—economics, management, and the natural sciences, among others. This disciplinary diversity, in our view, offers a useful lens for understanding how graduates from different academic trainings perceive the Program and arrive at their decisions to participate. In addition, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, which we think strengthens the overall analysis and lends greater confidence to our conclusions. Taken together, these design choices provide a firmer empirical footing for investigating volunteer employment patterns and the factors that shape them.

Adopting a mixed-methods design, we believe, adds analytical rigor and bolsters our confidence in the results. On that basis, we gain a more solid empirical grounding for exploring volunteers' employment trajectories and the various elements that appear to shape them. Our interview participants represented diverse disciplinary backgrounds and held a range of career ambitions. Their accounts offered useful insight into both the rational calculations underlying volunteers' assessment of the Program and the affective dimensions of their actual participation.

3.1. Employment Buffer Anchor: Stabilizing Society and Narrowing Regional Job Gaps

(1) Objective: Improving regional job distribution to foster coordinated growth across industries and development sectors.

By funnelling skilled graduates into less saturated labour markets, the Program simultaneously alleviates employment pressures in the more crowded eastern and central regions and helps prevent an oversupply of talent in those same areas. On the receiving end, it plugs long-standing vacancies in western grassroots services—education and healthcare being two prominent examples. Beyond merely filling posts, the inflow of fresh graduates brings with it new competencies and perspectives, which in turn may accelerate local industrial upgrading. Over time, what begins as an external infusion of human capital can gradually evolve into internally driven capacity-building. The net effect, we would argue, is a two-sided improvement in the spatial allocation of talent between the country's more developed and less developed areas.

My own academic background is in Investment Studies, and over the years I have observed first-hand just how stark the contrast is—in both development levels and employment opportunities—between China's eastern and western regions.

Graduates with my major can often find well-paid jobs in finance. But I found something different during college—volunteer teaching and community work gave me a sense of fulfillment I hadn't expected. So I signed up for the Western Program. I wanted to see if I could mesh my own goals with something larger. That year in the field pushed me toward civil service—and toward staying in community work. Take the case of T1—an Investment Studies graduate now on the civil service track. The Sichuan University of Science and Engineering data show this regional balancing effect in action. According to the survey, 96.8% of volunteers are placed in the central and western regions (Sichuan, Xinjiang, Chongqing, and Yunnan), with over half staying within Sichuan. A notable portion come from eastern provinces originally. Their service reduces competition for local

grassroots positions and prevents underutilization of the labor force. For Sichuan, the Program keeps sending graduates to

local posts, directly filling labor gaps and pushing the job market toward a more self-sustaining state.

Table 2. Volunteer Service Profile: Location, Post Type, and Duration

Service Location	N	%	Service Post	Ns	%	Service Duration	N	%
Sichuan	64	51.20%	Infrastructure support	48	38.40%	Under 1 Year	42	33.60%
Xinjiang	42	33.60%	Rural Governance	32	25.60%	1-2 Years	65	52.00%
Chongqing	12	9.60%	Rural Education	21	16.80%	Over 2 Years	18	14.40%
Yunnan	3	2.40%	General grassroots work	16	12.80%	-	-	-

This anchoring effect also appears in the post distribution. The survey shows a clear split across the four volunteer categories. Rural development and governance posts are the most sought-after, together making up over 60% of all assignments. This suggests the Program acts as a balancing mechanism—responsive to actual social needs—rather than a uniform distributor of labor. The survey numbers bear this out.

More importantly, the Program offers graduates a structured, government-backed employment pathway [6]. For those who face stiff competition and repeated setbacks in traditional markets—first-tier cities, top firms, or the civil service—it provides a viable alternative and eases some of the pressure. The Program offers structured placements along

with basic living support, which helps reduce graduates' anxiety about being jobless after graduation.

The service duration data confirm this. Those with one to two years of service make up the Program's core workforce. The Program also opens up less conventional career paths for young participants. Volunteers take on socially valuable work—in rural governance, education, poverty relief, and environmental protection. These experiences often help them discover new interests and directions, shifting their job search from reactive to more self-directed.

(2) Subjective Tendency: Stimulating the Initiative of Aspiring Young Talents Through Preferential Incentive Policies of the Western Program

Table 3. Summary Profile of Western Program Volunteers

Category	Sub-category	Number of People	Proportion
Gender	Male	44	35.20%
	Female	81	64.80%
Ethnicity	Han Chinese	115	92.00%
	Ethnic Minorities	10	8.00%
Educational Background	Bachelor's Degree	122	97.60%
	Above Bachelor's Degree	3	2.40%
Major	Humanities & Social Sciences	62	49.60%
	Science & Engineering	35	28.00%

Subjective orientation describes the psychological inclinations and vocational expectations held by volunteer participants. The predominance of female volunteers can be partially attributed to their superior interpersonal adaptability. For volunteers from ethnic minority groups, regional operational advantages in local grassroots postings serve as a partial driving factor for their participation. In terms of disciplinary backgrounds, humanities and social science graduates confront more intensive employment competition compared with science and engineering graduates who have access to more abundant employment resources. A considerable number of these graduates opt for grassroots service to take advantage of relevant supportive policies, which aligns with the phenomenon that bachelor's degree holders occupy the dominant proportion of Program volunteers.

The available evidence points to a shift in how graduates view the Program. It no longer appears to function as a fallback for those without better prospects; rather, growing numbers seem to be choosing grassroots service deliberately—as a way to acquire hands-on experience and, in their own words, to "make a difference." For those who commit seriously to the experience, this route can open up unusual opportunities for both career advancement and personal development [7].

Table 4. Volunteer Motivations

Purpose	Number of People	Proportion
Contribute to Society	92	73.60%
Accumulate Work Experience	102	84.00%
Further Study	43	34.40%
Employment Preferential Policies	73	58.40%
Explore Career Directions	48	38.40%
Ease Employment Pressure	48	38.40%
Personal Interest	31	24.80%
Others	0	0.00%

What, then, motivates current volunteers to sign up? A closer look at our survey numbers offers a multi-layered answer. Among the respondents, 84% cited grassroots experience as a primary draw; 73.6% indicated a desire to contribute to society; and 58.4% acknowledged the role of policy incentives—including, but not limited to, exam bonus points and preferential graduate admissions. Interestingly, these categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the majority of volunteers endorsed more than one motivating factor, suggesting that their decisions rest on a combination of considerations rather than any single rationale. Further,

34.4% of the sample pointed to academic advancement, most notably access to postgraduate programmes, as an additional pull factor. Taken as a whole, these percentages paint a picture of a volunteer pool driven by a diverse blend of personal aspirations, social commitments, and pragmatic career calculations.

"As a Public Administration major with a clear interest in public sector careers, I had well-defined reasons for joining the Western Program. I sought both to gain practical grassroots experience and to apply academic knowledge to real-world service contexts — and, in doing so, to lay a groundwork for my professional development in public administration. Working on policy and livelihood services has shown me that public service means action — not just words. And this experience has strengthened my conviction: applying what I know to national development is both a responsibility and a calling for our generation." (T2 — Public Administration — Public Sector Employment)

By 2024, the western region's GDP had reached 28.7 trillion RMB, underscoring its growing role as a pillar of national economic performance. Concurrently, expanding

opportunities in rural revitalisation, technological upgrading, and green industries have made it possible for new graduates to align their specialised training with nationally defined priorities—while also acquiring transferable workplace competencies. For many volunteers, this combination is precisely what makes the Program attractive. Beyond its function as a short-term bridge between degree completion and stable employment, the Program offers participants a structured setting in which to explore career directions and develop personally, all within a grassroots context. In our reading, this dual structure—connecting individual advancement with broader collective outcomes—generates a set of mutual gains: volunteers obtain experience and direction, while the Program simultaneously advances regional development objectives and supports the long-term viability of rural communities in the west.

3.2. Learning by Doing, Growing by Achieving: How Real Work Builds Real Capacity

Table 5. Statistics on Competency Improvement among University Student Volunteers

Competency Improvement Dimension	Number of People	Proportion	Competency Improvement Dimension	Number of People	Proportion
Stress Resistance	101	80%	Problem-solving Ability	105	84%
Communication and Coordination Ability	115	92%	Cross-cultural Understanding Ability	43	34%
Social Practice Ability	95	76%	Professional Skill Competency	41	33%
Sense of Social Responsibility	93	74%	Environmental Adaptation Ability	53	42%

The Western Program's defining feature is its experiential nature — it functions as a form of human capital development through direct engagement with complex grassroots realities. Volunteers navigate demanding environments and resolve practical problems independently. This comprehensive process cultivates not only professional competencies but also personal maturity and a deeper sense of purpose.

(1) It's Not Just Separate Skills—Competence That Transfers Across Settings

Soft skill development, in essence, is about weaving discrete abilities into a coherent personal repertoire. According to our survey, the biggest gains show up in communication and coordination (92%), problem-solving (84%), and the ability to handle stress (80%).

"Training sessions? They don't teach you this stuff. You learn it by just showing up—day in, day out, with real problems staring you in the face. Handling pressure, talking to people, bridging differences—it's all cumulative. And honestly, it's the rough patches that really forge you." (T2 — Public Administration — Public Sector Employment)

Volunteers grow not just through big campaigns, but also through the daily grind—routine tasks, operational headaches, the small stuff that piles up. What the Western Program really values, as their experience shows, is collective collaboration over individual star turns. Working across regions and functions, week after week, hones their ability to coordinate and sharpens their capacity for empathy. This kind of sustained engagement breaks down institutional walls, fosters social empathy and systems thinking, and, in the end, pulls the team closer together.

(2) From Textbooks to Practice—Making Academic Knowledge Actually Useful

Hard skill development, in this context, is really about putting academic knowledge into practice. Survey results

show that volunteers report measurable gains: 33% feel more professionally competent, and 42% say they've become more adaptable. Their day-to-day work covers a range of grassroots tasks—policy implementation, project management, document drafting, and direct public service delivery. Most of them pick up hands-on experience with government platforms, community welfare activities, and field survey coordination. A smaller group goes further, developing niche expertise in agricultural extension, teaching, or community organizing. Resource constraints, interestingly, push them to think systemically—they learn to identify problems, pull together resources, and carry solutions through from start to finish. This kind of experiential learning builds skills that feel real and lasting, in a way that purely classroom-based training rarely can.

Grassroots assignments can feel routine and far from glamorous—yet the learning they offer is something you just can't get from formal schooling. Dealing with messy community dynamics, day in and day out, teaches volunteers how to handle pressure and, just as importantly, how to communicate and collaborate with people who see things differently. Regular interactions with residents and colleagues from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds naturally broaden volunteers' cross-cultural perspectives. This kind of on-the-ground learning does more than build professional skills—it cultivates a genuine sense of social responsibility and, at the same time, deepens their self-understanding. For quite a few participants, the Western Program ends up functioning as both a window into Chinese society and a springboard for ongoing personal growth that extends well beyond their service term. (T3 — International Economics and Trade — Corporate Employment)

Through hands-on grassroots training, volunteers pick up both soft literacy and professional hard skills. These

combined competencies, in the long run, become core professional assets for their future careers—giving them a real competitive edge, whether they're entering the job market or taking civil service exams.

3.3. Finding Purpose, Discovering Self: Service as a Path to Growth

What most graduates chase these days is predictable enough—good pay, city life, and the comfort of job security. The Western Program, by contrast, doesn't promise more money; it offers a different way of looking at things. Out in the actual communities, volunteers come to see, in a very direct way, what gets lost in aggregate data: people still waiting—for know-how, for hands-on skills, for someone who truly gives a damn.

The sense of being needed and the mission of supporting national strategies help volunteers break narrow mindsets such as income-only orientation and metropolis-only preference. It fosters diversified, sound employment values centered on social contribution, personal growth and patriotism.

(1). Personal Value "Field": Being in the Torrent of Social Development, Realizing Self-Value Recognition

At the National Medal and National Honorary Titles Award Ceremony, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the need to harbor the ambition of a strong country, keep the prosperity of the country in mind, look forward to the happiness of the people, be loyal to the country, and devote oneself to serving the country. He urged integrating the small "self" into the big "self" of the country, and realizing personal value and showing the style of life in the service of the people and fulfilling responsibilities to the country. These words profoundly resonated in the hearts of many confused college students, clearing away their confusion like clouds revealing the moon. "I responded to General Secretary Xi Jinping's call for youth to 'go to the grassroots, go to the West,' and resolutely signed up for the Western Plan. Although my major in Applied Mathematics is not directly related to grassroots service work, I believe that the stage to realize personal value should be where one keeps their feet on the ground. Here, I strive to apply the rigor of data thinking to grassroots research and use logical analysis capabilities to solve practical problems, finding a unique connection point between professional knowledge and serving society. This experience makes me deeply believe that as long as one has a passionate heart, any professional background can find its own path to serve the people and realize self-worth in the tempering of the Western Plan." (T4-Applied Mathematics-Education/Data Analysis) Most of the college student volunteers we surveyed have been serving at the grassroots level for 1 to 2 years. According to the survey results, more than half of the college student volunteers still choose to stay. We cannot be clear about everyone's life attitude and career choice ideas, but through communication, we can still feel their inner sense of

belonging and gain. Just as General Secretary Xi said, they realize their personal value in serving the people, practicing their original intention and true heart.

(2). Social Value "Field": Condensing Personal Value Realizations, Continuing the Soul of Society and Country

In this era where utility is supreme and entertainment is paramount, the state, society, and the masses are increasingly invoking words like "value" and "dedication." The core socialist values have become familiar in recent years. More and more socialist and communist great figures are mentioned, and their spirits and energy are promoted; we sing their praises, we follow them. But as these names fill our surroundings and minds, we can sadly feel that the colors of utility and entertainment are growing in the shadows, because we deeply know that the more an era lacks something, the more it mentions it. However, in recent years, the names of contributors in our contemporary society have appeared more and more. More young people, with their vigorous and bright-eyed images, appear in the public eye. In the pictures, their backgrounds are more often barren land or mud rather than anything else. The places they appear are also more concentrated in the central and western regions of our country. Among them, the resumes of many people also present the background of the Western Plan. In this questionnaire survey, many college student volunteers expressed their pursuit of realizing self-worth, but this is only the first step to realizing social value. How to achieve the transformation from quantitative change to qualitative change is a major practical problem. Nowadays, under the guidance of a series of national policies such as the Western Plan, more people who have realized personal value are able to "benefit the world when successful," and are able to give back to society. They are all able to deeply feel the difficulties of the collective and be grateful for their personal circumstances. It is through this experience that personal value can be condensed to continue the soul of the family and the country.

4. Chapter 4 Entrapment by Dilemmas: The Intertwined Spread of Practical Spiritual Dilemmas Makes Breaking New Ground Imperative

As a national strategy, the Western Plan possesses significant social benefits and profound educational value. However, we must examine its duality from a dialectical perspective: while affirming its positive significance, we should also guide college students to [be aware of] the potential practical challenges and structural dilemmas behind it. With the development of the times and social变革 (transformation), the Western Plan also presents a need for full anticipation and rational evaluation in the real world.

4.1. Objective Dilemmas:

Table 6. Summary Table of Objective Issues in the College Student Volunteer Western Plan

	High Work Pressure	Harsh Conditions	Insufficient Subsidies	Lack of Guidance	Supply-Demand Mismatch	Weak Career Connection
Count	37	27	96	63	86	81
Proportion	30%	22%	77%	50%	69%	65%

(1) Fragile Economic and Security Foundations: Eroding the Sustaining Basis of Volunteer Service

Adequate material support serves as a fundamental

prerequisite that enables volunteers to carry out their service steadily. Nevertheless, field investigations and data collection results indicate that inadequate subsidy provision stands out

as the most severe problem, affecting as high as 77 percent of volunteers. This directly leads to volunteers facing realistic economic pressure during their service, making it difficult to take root stably. "Objectively, the conditions in the service area are relatively harsh, which we were psychologically prepared for before coming. But truly being in it, we find that the monthly living subsidy is indeed a bit tight to cope with daily expenses [8]." At the same time, grassroots work tasks are very heavy, and "high work pressure" is a common feeling, sometimes making people feel a sense of loss. We are willing to go deep into the grassroots and overcome the difficulties of objective conditions, but when realistic economic pressure overlaps with heavy work pressure, it inevitably makes people feel powerless. To be honest, this situation will, to a certain extent, weaken the intention of many modern young people to choose similar positions in the long run. If a more reasonable and secure incentive and support system could be established, it is believed that it would better protect and stimulate everyone's enthusiasm for service." (T2—Public Administration - Public Sector) Meanwhile, nearly one-third (30%) of volunteers reported high work pressure, and over one-fifth (22%) believed conditions were harsh. These three dimensions jointly form the fundamental predicament confronting on-site volunteer participants. Deficient economic support and living security conditions exert direct impacts on volunteers' service experience and their willingness to continue local service engagement.

(2) Absence of Management and Support Systems, Limiting Volunteer Capability Enhancement and Growth

Sound managerial support acts as a core guarantee for sustaining high-quality volunteer service delivery. The survey shows that half (50%) of the volunteers explicitly pointed out the lack of guidance during the service process. At the same time, many practical problems, in their words, "rely heavily on experience"; coordinating human relations is a great learning curve, and the lack of guidance leaves them feeling isolated and helpless when adapting to the environment and carrying out work. For example, against the grand strategic background of Western Development and building a beautiful countryside, the grassroots still need more professional talents, but these professional positions still suffer from problems such as a lack of fresh blood and a断层 (gap/break) in personnel. This issue is closely related to the supply-demand mismatch mentioned by 69% of volunteers. Due to the mismatch between position allocation and volunteers' majors and abilities, their professional value is difficult to exert. The absence of structured guidance exacerbates the person-post mismatch, setting in motion a negative cycle that undermines both volunteers' job performance and their personal development.

(3) Uncertain Paths, Anxious Futures

As a time-limited service program, the Western Plan's value ultimately depends on its contribution to volunteers' long-term career development. Yet 65% of participants report a perceived "weak career connection" — their grassroots experience, in other words, has not effectively bridged to the mainstream employment market. While policy incentives do exist, the value of grassroots service experience remains uncertain in non-public-sector employment. This leaves many volunteers facing a de facto "re-employment" challenge after their service term — and that same uncertainty, in turn, undermines their engagement and self-confidence during service. [9]

4.2. What Volunteers Struggle with Most

Table 7. Subjective Challenges Faced by Volunteers

	Sense of Loneliness	Anxiety	Career Confusion	Maladaptation to New Place	Psychological Pressure
Count	86	59	66	41	37
Proportion	69%	47%	53%	33%	30%

Volunteers, however, don't just wrestle with external conditions; they also carry inner burdens—psychological unease, cognitive friction, and the quiet doubt that often goes unspoken. And these subjective forces, in many cases, can shape their service satisfaction and the duration of their stay every bit as powerfully as any visible obstacle on the ground.

(1) Dashed expectations, weakened social bonds, and the emotional toll they take on volunteers

Most volunteers begin with sincere motives—they truly want to serve. Yet the gap between expectation and reality can be jarring: tougher living, cultural distance, and ill-fitting expertise. This accumulation of mismatches, over time, weighs on their emotional state more than any external hardship. Looking at our numbers, 69% of volunteers report feeling severely lonely, 47% show signs of anxiety, and 33% struggle persistently with adjusting to local work and daily life. These emotional challenges don't stay separate—they feed into each other and build up, piling a heavy psychological load onto each volunteer's shoulders. Over time, that mounting strain keeps testing not just their willingness to stay in the program, but also their own inner strength to carry on.

(2) Ambiguous identity, uncertain career—both breed self-doubt among volunteers

Volunteers often find their self-perception complicated by the temporary nature of their roles—they're caught between being a current service provider and a future job seeker. The data reflect this ambiguity: 53% explicitly report career confusion during their service term. As one participant put it: "My undergraduate major, Fashion and Apparel Design, did not align well with the actual tasks of the Western Development Program. This mismatch was my primary challenge. I was very confused at the beginning. Additionally, being in Xinjiang with no local contacts and little understanding of the environment made adaptation extremely difficult." (T5—Fashion and Apparel Design—Taking the Public Institution Exam)

What do these cases point to? Volunteer career confusion, it seems, arises from two interwoven sources—uncertainty about what comes after service, and a sense that the work itself lacks real meaning. When daily tasks don't live up to expectations, and when specialized skills sit idle, self-worth slowly erodes. That erosion, in turn, feeds both a nagging disorientation in the present and a gnawing anxiety about what lies ahead.

(3) Beyond a Stepping Stone? Finding Belonging Through Service

For a portion of student volunteers, the Western Development Program looks less like a calling and more like a calculated move—something to polish their grad school applications, boost their civil service exam scores, or pad their CV for the job market. And sure, it's only human to show up with some practical ambitions. But here's the catch: when the work turns monotonous and the living conditions get rough, those who came primarily for personal payoff often find themselves disappointed—and their drive fizzles out fast. That kind of purely instrumental mindset, in the end, doesn't

just drag down the quality of service; it also robs volunteers of the genuine personal development that comes from hands-on grassroots experience. For the vast majority, though, the program's meaning shifts over time—it stops being merely a strategic checkbox and starts to take on real weight, shaped by what they actually live through out there. So what sets these volunteers apart? They don't treat service and self-growth as opposing forces. They invest fully in the work—and, along the way, they absorb lessons from it. In return, they come to see that hard work and personal gain actually go hand in hand. "I know—we live in a self-interested world. People see this program as a springboard. And I get it. Who doesn't want something back for their effort? But here's what I've come to believe: serving others and growing yourself don't have to be opposites. For me, it's a daily balancing act—give and take, work and life, service and self. That's how you stay grounded." (T3—International Economics and Trade—Enterprise Employment)

5. Chapter 5 Breaking the Deadlock of Dilemmas: Problem-Guided Policy Adjustment and Recommendations

Addressing the subjective and objective dilemmas exposed during the implementation of the Western Development Program, this study proposes the following precise and systematic improvement measures based on volunteer appeal data, aiming to achieve the optimization and upgrading of policies.

5.1. Coping Recommendations for Objective Dilemmas

Table 8. Summary of Recommendations for Breaking Objective Dilemmas for Western Development Program Volunteers

	Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage
Increase subsidy standards	96	77%	Strengthen management training	41	33%
Strengthen career guidance	63	50%	Expand employment channels	83	66%
Optimize post allocation	86	69%	Improve consultation systems	75	60%

(1). Improve the Economic Security System to Ensure the Rational Implementation of Subsidies

Table 9. Statistical Table of Satisfaction with Basic Subsidy Distribution (Five-Level) Opinions

	0~1	1~2	2~3	3~4	4~5
Timeliness of living allowance distribution	4.8%	8%	12.8%	27.2%	52.8%
Accommodation conditions and housing subsidies	6.4%	9.6%	20.8%	20.8%	41.6%
Basic Medical Insurance Coverage	2.4%	2.4%	7.2%	20.8%	67.2%
Rationality of Transportation Subsidy	16.8%	16%	16%	23.2%	34.4%

Addressing the objective difficulties exposed during the implementation of the Western Plan requires the establishment of a systematic response mechanism [10]. The primary task is to improve the economic security system,

focusing on resolving the volunteers' concerns. Given that 77% of volunteers intend to raise existing subsidy standards, alongside comprehensive survival stress including 30% of participants experiencing intensive work pressure and 22% confronting tough service conditions, a regionally adjusted dynamic subsidy system is required. Such a mechanism should adopt differentiated subsidy criteria across provincial and county administrative tiers, offer special stipends for demanding grassroots posts in remote regions, and optimize the integrated subsidy framework combining basic allowances and performance-based incentives. Meanwhile, full play should be given to the supportive functions of financial subsidies and social security policies so as to comprehensively optimize volunteers' fundamental living conditions. Nevertheless, practical satisfaction with current subsidy policies should also be taken into account. According to data analysis, living subsidies, housing subsidies, medical subsidies and transportation subsidies are assessed on a five-tier satisfaction scale. Most participants rate each type of subsidy above Level 3, which demonstrates general public acceptance of the existing subsidy arrangement. Given these challenges, it seems reasonable that policy recommendations should draw not only on what volunteers say they need, but also on how they assess the support conditions they actually experience on the ground [11].

(2) Tuning the Matching Between Volunteers and Posts—With an Eye on Supply-Demand Balance

For any talent deployment effort, getting the person-job match right from the start is crucial—it directly affects how efficiently the whole service operation runs. Our data show that 69% of volunteers face some form of supply-demand mismatch, and half of them go through their service term without effective career guidance. That's why we see a clear need for a formal dual evaluation system, one that looks at both the volunteer's professional background and the core requirements of the post they're assigned to.

On the recruitment side, we'd suggest building a smart matching platform that helps target the right people for the right posts—especially those grassroots positions that are hardest to fill, where specialized skills are most urgently needed. For training and support, we propose a three-tier structure, alongside an expanded "dual mentorship" model that reaches a broader pool of volunteers.

And when it comes to performance, we think it's worth shifting toward a results-based standard—judging volunteers by what they actually deliver on the ground, rather than by time served or paperwork filed. This kind of approach, we believe, encourages real skill-building and sets volunteers up for longer-term career development, well beyond their service period [5].

(3) Employment System Reform—With Volunteer Mobility in Mind

A key challenge we've spotted: 65% of volunteers really struggle when it comes to making the leap from service back into the regular job market. Our main response to that is to expand the pathways available for their career development. Concretely, we're looking at three coordinated moves—upgrading the employment service framework, rolling out the "1131" model consistently across the board, and building a clear link between what volunteers have done on the ground and what enterprises actually look for when they hire.

Joint targeted recruitment should be carried out with central enterprises and state-owned enterprises, clarifying the priority employment rights for grassroots service experience in

relevant positions. At the same time, the scale of special recruitment for grassroots public institutions should be expanded, the "Three Relaxations and One Permission" policy should be implemented, and basic-level experience adaptation courses should be developed. Multiple measures should be taken to enhance the recognition and competitiveness of service experience in the employment

market.

5.2. Recommendations for Addressing Subjective Difficulties

(1) Constructing a Multi-level Psychological Support System to Alleviate Emotional Adaptation Barriers

Table 10. Statistical Table of Support for Help-Seeking Channels in Difficult Times

	Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage
Unit Leaders/Colleagues	88	70%	Family/Friends	77	62%
Peer Volunteers	92	74%	Self-regulation	90	72%
Program Project Office	51	41%	Lack of Channels	4	3%

Addressing the prevalent psychological adaptation issues among the volunteer group (69% feelings of loneliness, 47% anxiety, 33% culture shock), a professional psychological support mechanism needs to be established. Specifically, a "professional psychological counseling + peer support + cultural integration" trinity counseling system should be constructed. In the data analysis, regarding the types of help-seeking channels for those encountering objective or psychological difficulties, out of a base of 125 members, the majority primarily solve objective problems through experienced and professional leaders, and seek resonance and emotional comfort by sharing with peer volunteers and family/friends. However, it is undeniable that many people or many problems can only be addressed through self-regulation by the volunteers themselves, with a proportion as high as 72%, and even 3% find it difficult to resolve, lacking direct coping mechanisms. Therefore, we also need to help volunteers effectively alleviate emotional discomfort caused by factors such as the gap between ideals and reality, and cultural gaps, by regularly conducting group psychological counseling, establishing volunteer mutual aid groups, and organizing local cultural experience activities, thereby enhancing their environmental adaptability and psychological resilience.

(2) Improving the Professional Identity Mechanism to Resolve Career Development Confusion

Facing the career confusion issues existing among 53% of volunteers, it is necessary to establish a career guidance system that runs through the entire service process. Honestly, those early days were a mess—I felt lost more often than not. But bit by bit, as I got used to the local environment, with a nudge from coworkers and some self-coaxing on my own part, I eventually found my footing in work that wasn't really a match for my major. These days, I handle problems way more smoothly—and I actually feel like I'm part of the trade. (T5—Fashion and Apparel Design—Taking the Career Track Exam)

Concretely, we're zeroing in on three practical fronts: laying out clear career paths for volunteers, sizing up individual strengths so we can tailor plans to each person, and building hands-on training platforms where volunteers can sharpen their professional edge. All of that, in the end, boils down to one thing—helping volunteers figure out who they are and where they fit in the bigger picture. Once they've got that straightened out, they can actually put their real skills to work on the ground and show what they're capable of. That kind of clarity, we think, does two things at once: it helps volunteers square their service role with their longer-term career goals, and it also strengthens their belief that their professional know-how is genuinely worth something.

(3) Values Talk, Refocused—Impact Over Returns for Volunteers

Looking at the support channel figures, a pretty striking gap stands out: 72% of volunteers rely on self-adjustment to get through rough patches, while only 41% actually turn to the Program Office for help. That difference, to us, points to something—purely utilitarian motivations seem to be fairly widespread. So here's what we're suggesting, based on what we've seen: two concrete moves to start with—getting volunteers in front of real-life role models, and setting up spaces where they can swap practical field stories with each other. We think these kinds of approaches do a better job of building genuine commitment than abstract mission training alone ever could. Values, after all, aren't passed on through catchy slogans; they sink in through real stories of dedication and through the kind of peer support that volunteers can actually see and feel on a daily basis.

Then we'd add a second piece: setting up a no-frills evaluation system—one that captures performance fairly and recognizes real effort in a transparent way. Under this kind of setup, official reviews now factor in two dimensions that so far have gotten little attention: how well volunteers are adjusting psychologically, and whether they're actively helping their peers get familiar with the local culture. This design, in our view, goes beyond just counting outputs—it actually pushes volunteers to find value in the experience itself, rather than treating their service as a box-ticking exchange. [12]

6. Chapter 6 Conclusion

There is an in-depth strategic correlation between the Western Plan and university students' employment development. The initiative effectively alleviates contemporary graduate employment pressure and serves as a comprehensive platform to foster graduates' rational employment outlooks and facilitate the realization of their lifelong values. Participating in the Western Plan is, for many college students, a major life decision—one that comes with both opportunities and real challenges. To navigate it well, they need a clear sense of their own identity, a sober weighing of costs and benefits, and a career plan that looks ahead, not just at the moment.

From the national and societal side, fine-tuning the policy design of the Western Plan can help uncover what volunteers actually gain in terms of life value, and how they picture their future after service. By drawing on volunteers' on-the-ground experiences and their perceptual understanding of the work, we can derive useful principles for adjusting macro-level planning. That, in turn, allows the program to better serve both national strategies and youth development—a critical step toward building a talent-strong country and achieving coordinated regional growth [13].

Looking ahead, when more and more university students start to align their own job choices with the broader national development trends, the payoffs are mutual. Individuals get promising career prospects, and at the same time, society moves toward a more balanced, dynamic, and sustainable development landscape.

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