

Study on the Driving Factors Influencing Sichuan-Chongqing University Students' Willingness to Participate in the Western Plan from a Career Planning Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines university students' willingness to participate in the Western Plan. Against the backdrop of increasing numbers of graduates and intensifying competition in the job market, the program has become one of the employment options for some students. Through questionnaire surveys and interviews, a total of 305 university students from Sichuan and Chongqing regions were investigated. The results indicate that the program is often regarded as an alternative employment option, with students' understanding of it being relatively superficial. Factors influencing willingness to participate include "temporarily alleviating employment pressure" as a key pull factor, while "information barriers" and "grassroots working conditions" serve as core push factors. Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed, such as targeted promotion, policy enhancement, and tripartite collaboration optimization, to provide insights for increasing participation, supporting western development, and improving employment outcomes.

Keywords: University Students, The Western Plan, Participation Willingness, Career Planning, Grassroots Employment.

1. Introduction to the Issue

On May 3, 2025, in a reply letter to the volunteer service team of Xieyite Primary School's border guarding and teaching in the Western Plan, the General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "It is hoped that the majority of young people will strengthen their ideals and convictions, cultivate a profound sense of patriotism, hone their practical skills, carry forward the spirit of perseverance, shine where the motherland and people need them most, and contribute their youthful strength to the modernization of China." [1]The Western Plan is a project jointly implemented by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. It aims to guide university students to integrate their academic knowledge with the practical needs of grassroots communities in western China, encouraging them to dedicate their youth and efforts to the western regions of the motherland. In recent years, the total number of graduates from Chinese universities has been increasing annually, while the job market faces an imbalance between supply and demand. As a result, a large number of fresh graduates encounter employment challenges. Against this backdrop, the employment choices of graduates have become increasingly diversified and complex. In addition to pursuing civil service recruitment examinations, postgraduate studies, or entering the job market directly, many graduates view grassroots employment programs such as the Western Plan as a stepping stone to secure suitable positions.

Previous research on the Western Plan has been extensive, including studies on the policy development of the program using policy tools and investigations into volunteers' willingness to stay and teach in local communities. In domestic studies on university students' motivations for participating in the Western Plan, Xue Yanqin et al. found that the primary factors influencing students' decision to become

volunteers are: gaining experience and broadening horizons, responding to national calls, addressing employment challenges, obtaining civil service recruitment examination bonuses, and realizing personal ideals^[2]. Wang Chuhui and Zhang Qianying identified key motivations for volunteers as: understanding and experiencing the realities of western regions, serving the west with idealistic aspirations, self-improvement, accumulating work experience, and seizing the opportunity to change their current circumstances^[3].

Overall, existing research has primarily focused on the implementation of the program itself and the participation status of volunteers, with the motivations of participants briefly mentioned in discussions of participation. However, limited attention has been paid to the potential pool of university students who have yet to participate. As the future driving force of the Western Plan, this study investigates the reasons why university students consider or decline participation from a career planning perspective, i.e., the driving factors behind their willingness. Theoretically, this contributes to enriching the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior in the field of university students' volunteer service decision-making. Practically, it provides insights for governments and universities to refine existing policies and attract more outstanding talents to serve in western regions, at the grassroots level, and where the nation needs them most.

2. Research Design

This study employs a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews. In the preliminary phase, a semi-structured interview outline was developed through literature review, covering dimensions such as background information, motivational cognition, and career development. In-depth on-site interviews were conducted with active Western Plan volunteers at the researchers' institution to gain a comprehensive understanding of their practical experiences and perspectives on the program. The volunteers also

facilitated visits for the research team to their workplaces to observe the working environment and understand job responsibilities.

Based on the interview findings, a questionnaire was designed, guided by the framework of career planning. The questionnaire inquired about respondents' willingness to participate in the Western Plan upon graduation and was administered via the "Wenjuanxing" online platform. The design of the questionnaire primarily revolved around dimensions such as personal basic information, awareness of the Western Plan, intensity of participation willingness, motivational factors (such as personal growth, social value, policy incentives, and career development), concerns (such as working environment, living conditions, and career prospects), and channels of information acquisition. Each dimension included 2–3 specific questions, primarily in multiple-choice format to ensure feasibility for quantitative

data analysis. The respondents were primarily third- and fourth-year university students from Sichuan and Chongqing, encompassing all undergraduate years as well as graduate students, thereby ensuring a broad sample to capture the perspectives and motivations of students at different academic stages. Questionnaires were distributed through channels such as grade-level and class-specific social media groups. A total of 305 valid questionnaires were collected (gender: 112 male, 193 female; academic year: 23 first-year students, 87 second-year students, 114 third-year students, 61 fourth-year students, and 20 graduate students), providing robust data support for subsequent analysis.

3. Research Findings and Analysis

3.1. Diversified Career Paths with the Western Plan as an Alternative Option

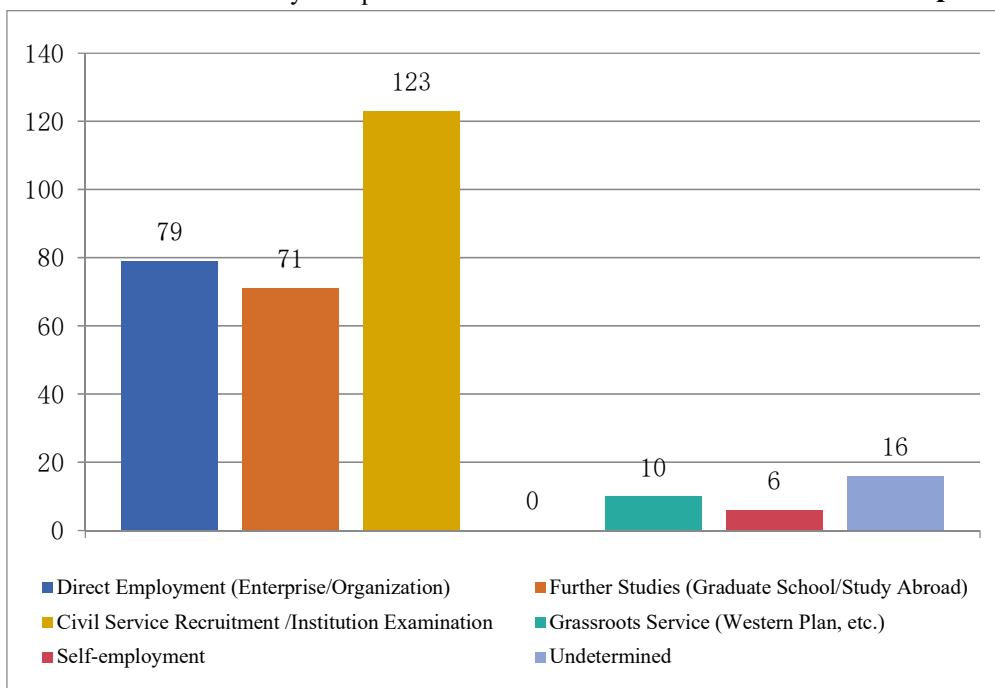


Figure 1. Employment Planning of University Students

The survey results indicate that the career planning of university students primarily focuses on direct employment for financial independence, further studies to enhance competitiveness, or pursuing civil service recruitment examinations for job stability. Only a small proportion of students regard the Western Plan as their primary goal. Given that the service period of the program ranges from one to three years, it is often viewed as a pathway for “delayed employment” or “gradual employment.” Since participants still need to seek employment after completing their service, the program is frequently considered a backup option when

other career paths are unsuccessful. Nevertheless, some students remain undecided about their career plans, expressing uncertainty and confusion about the future. This highlights the need for more guidance and support from universities and society.

3.2. The Program Awareness is Widespread, Yet Public Understanding Remains Superficial

Table 1. Respondents' Understanding of the Western Plan and Information Channels

Question	Percentage of Respondents			
Are you familiar with grassroots employment programs such as the Western Plan?	Very familiar 6.56%	Somewhat familiar 46.89%	Only heard of it 39.6%	Completely unfamiliar 6.89%
How did you learn about it? (Multiple choices)	School promotion (lectures, posters, etc.) 63.61%	Government or official media 49.51%	Social media (Weibo, official accounts, etc.) 72.46%	Introduced by senior students or acquaintances 33.44%

The data show that 86.56% of students are either “somewhat familiar” or “have only heard of” the Western Plan, indicating broad promotional coverage. However, only

6.56% of students claim to be “very familiar” with it. Most students lack sufficient understanding of critical information such as policy details, job requirements, and work

experiences, making it difficult for them to accurately assess their compatibility with the program. This reflects a deficiency in the depth of promotion. For example, insufficient communication regarding policy specifics, actual job demands, and the real work experiences of volunteers has

hindered students from developing a comprehensive and profound understanding of the Western Plan.

3.3. The Willingness to Participate is impacted; core factors must Be Taken into Account.

Table 2. Factors Affecting Intentions to Participate in the Western Development Program

Factors considered for participation in the Western China Volunteer Service Program (Multiple Choice)		Factors not considered for participation in the Western China Volunteer Service Program (Multiple Choice)	
To gain grassroots work experience	60.33%	Living conditions at the grassroots level	50.82%
To temporarily alleviate employment pressure	73.77%	Career advancement opportunities are limited after completing the service period	48.85%
To serve society and realize value	61.31%	Prefer direct employment or further education	48.2%
To benefit from policy support and safeguards	42.3%	Lack of relevant information and guidance	51.15%
Others	0.98%	The family does not support this choice	15.41%
		Others	0.98%

This study combines questionnaire survey data and interview materials to further explore the core factors influencing university students' willingness to participate in the Western China Volunteer Service Program. It views "Factors not considered for participation in the Western China Volunteer Service Program" as "push factors" that prevent the program from drawing in more fresh graduates, while "Factors considered for participation in the Western China Volunteer Service Program" are regarded as "pull factors" that entice current university students to enroll.

3.3.1. Converge Multiple Pulling Forces , with Diverse Motivations Driving Participation.

There are four main reasons why university students think about taking part in the Western China Volunteer Service Program, with "To temporarily alleviate employment pressure" being the most common (Table 2). Fresh graduates have a variety of options, including further study, taking civil service exams, applying for jobs at public institutions, looking for work, or starting their own business. Some students, however, do not plan their careers, which leads to a lack of internship experience during their studies and a mismatch between their professional skills and market demands, making it impossible for them to meet employers' demands at their current level. Others initially made the decision to prepare for civil service or postgraduate exams, but for a variety of reasons, they were unable to secure employment.

By taking part in the Western China Volunteer Service Program, they appear to have a good chance of reducing work demands and unemployment risks. They hope to improve western communities, obtain practical experience, and find personal fulfillment through their service-period work assignments. This gives them a buffer period, more chances to advance in their careers, and basic financial security and support.

Upon completion of their service, the Western China Volunteer Service Program receives preferential policies, including bonus points for postgraduate exams and specified places in civil service recruiting. By taking part in the Western Program, they can prevent the unpleasant feelings that come with prolonged unemployment by maintaining an active job

status when better possibilities are unavailable. This engagement, which is primarily driven by the desire to solve pressing employment issues, demonstrates the Western Program's advantageous role in addressing temporary employment paradoxes. In summary, there are many reasons to consider enrolling in the Western China Volunteer Service Program, and these factors shouldn't be taken into account independently.

3.3.2. Multi-direction Thrust Becomes Resistance, with Significant Participation Barriers.

The main reason students did not think about taking part in the Western China Volunteer Service Program was a lack of relevant information and guidance, which accounted for 51.15% (Table 2). Policy analyses of the program remained cursory, whether they were presented at universities or on social media. The job duties, compensation packages, and other practical aspects of various service roles were not well explained to students, and current volunteers' experiences were not sufficiently shared. "Living conditions at the grassroots level" made up 50.82% of the responses, meaning that half of the students were worried about the difficult living and working conditions in western and grassroots areas, fearing that they would find it difficult to adjust to the pace of life. 'Career advancement opportunities are limited after completing the service period' accounted for 48.85%. According to the way policies are currently being implemented, volunteers must take on employment risks after their service period ends.[4] They possibly run the risk of social disconnection and professional skill degradation during reemployment. Additionally, grassroots workers are susceptible to "secondary employment difficulties" because their work experience frequently does not correspond with specific occupational requirements. Due to a lack of family support, 15.4% of students do not think about participating. Parents frequently want their children to choose stable jobs closer to home. Because they are worried about the prospects for development in western regions. These elements combine to create obstacles that prevent students from participating in the Western China Volunteer Service Program, which reflects students' comprehensive consideration of real-world

circumstances, information availability, and future growth when making career decisions.

4. Research Recommendations and Implications

The following three suggestions for optimization and improvement are put forth in this paper based on the previously mentioned analysis of the push and pull factors influencing university graduates' participation in the Western China Volunteer Service Program. These are intended to bring the program up-to-date with current advancements and draw in more top-notch fresh graduates.

4.1. Focus on Student Groups for Targeted Nurturing

According to the diverse cognitive levels and needs of students from various grades, majors, and regional backgrounds, a tiered and categorized publicity system will be established. Promotion of the Western China Volunteer Service Program may be incorporated into orientation, class meetings, and thematic education for first- and second-year undergraduates. Students' sense of social responsibility will be developed through engaging case studies, documentary screenings, and peer testimonials. Dedicated information sessions should be held for third- and fourth-year undergraduates, who make up the core cohort for participation in the Western China Volunteer Service Program. These should highlight the program's appeal, provide compelling experiences and success stories from exceptional volunteers, and explain policy protections and advantages. Promotion for postgraduate students should be in line with their interests in academic research. Such as, specialized technical support roles and grassroots research positions. The importance of practical engagement in improving academic capabilities should be emphasized.

From a disciplinary perspective, science and engineering students receive extensive technology application scenarios, while humanities students receive more guidance on social principles. Owing to regional differences, students from the central and western regions are encouraged to use homecoming service opportunities to build emotional connections, while students from the eastern region receive adaptation advice and insights into local living conditions at their service destinations. This strategy produces outreach that is customized for each person.

4.2. Strengthen Policy Pathways to Stimulate Momentum

Although some policies and training pathways still need to be improved, the Western China Volunteer Service Program's policies and safeguards are currently reasonably well-established in every way.

Create a thorough policy safeguards checklist that outlines measurable requirements for housing, healthcare, compensation, and other essential services during service periods. These will be made available to the public via reputable channels like government websites and job platform at universities. Put in place a "1+N" support system: "N" stands for increasing the variety of career paths, providing targeted recruitment channels for exceptional performers, and encouraging businesses to use voluntary service experience as a recruitment bonus; "1" indicates specialized employment guidance within a year of service completion. Create an

"Entrepreneurship Fund" to address various "post-service concerns" and offer incubation support for volunteers launching their own companies after their service.

Create a tripartite cultivation system that combines development, growth, and service, turning the volunteer's one to three years of service into a useful classroom for enhancing capabilities. Provide pre-service training that is specific to a given role; work with professional institutions to provide training in soft skills. In order to achieve growth from theory to practice, implement a mentoring program within service units that progresses from one-on-one guidance to independent work. Volunteers' work content, results, and competency development are routinely documented by a dynamic tracking system. It allows for the visualization of personal development through well-documented portfolios. Employing companies provide competency assessment reports upon service completion, which are essential resources for future training and employment.

4.3. Collaborate in a Tripartite to Build Cohesion and Pool Strengths

The coordinated mobilization of resources from the government, educational institutions, and society at large is necessary for the long-term development of the Western China Volunteer Service Program and the professional development of volunteers. This creates a cooperative mechanism that is defined by "policy guidance, institutional implementation, and societal support."

Encourage companies and public welfare groups to establish "Western China Volunteer Service Program Support Funds" at the societal level so that volunteers may receive extra help like living subsidies and career development counseling. In order to promote a culture where "serving at the grassroots level is honorable," the media ought to publish more motivational volunteer narratives. Establish a "home-school community" communication feedback system at the same time to get regular feedback on rules from parents and students. Then, in order to promote co-construction, multi-party cooperation, and a positive ecosystem of shared benefits, swiftly modify and improve implementation specifications. The Western China Volunteer Service Program will encourage more youth to participate in the future as the state increases its support for it and enhances pertinent regulations. It will be a crucial method for students to gain real-world experience, enhance their general skills, and accomplish their career goals.

In addition to improving the distribution of talent resources and reducing national employment pressures. This will provide a constant flow of energy to the growth of grassroots communities and western regions.

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