

Research on Practical Approaches to Patriotic Education for University Students Based on the Development of a Volunteer Role Model Database

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Abstract: Deepening patriotic education and cultivating a new generation capable of shouldering the mission of national development and renewal represent an important direction of higher education in the new era. Role models among university student volunteers embody the spirit of patriotism in contemporary China and possess distinct educational value. In view of the insufficient contemporary relevance and disconnection from students' lives in current patriotic education role models, this study puts forward the concept, approaches and methods of constructing a volunteer role model repository, so as to integrate patriotic role model education into the daily life of university students and improve its affinity and effectiveness. The study further proposes pathways to integrate patriotic education into students' daily life through the construction of the repository: promoting the spirit of contemporary patriotism, giving play to the initiative of university students, building practical platforms, and improving long-term mechanisms. This is also a concrete practice to implement the normative requirements for patriotic education and advance the high-quality moral education system in universities.

Keywords: volunteer service, role model repository, patriotism, approach

1. Introduction

Patriotism is the core of the Chinese spirit, and it is essential to vigorously promote the spirit of patriotism and foster a high degree of national self-respect and confidence. In January 2025, the Outline of the Plan for Building China into an Education Power (2024-2035) explicitly called for deepening education in patriotism, collectivism and social values, and cultivating a new generation capable of shouldering the great task of national development and renewal. University students in the new era are the participants, witnesses, and builders of the country's modernization drive. Conducting patriotic education among university students constitutes a vital component of moral education in higher education institutions, represents practical action in upholding the spirit of higher education institutions. It is stressed that people should be adept at learning from advanced models [1], and is an essential requirement for cultivating a new generation of individuals with ideals, a sense of responsibility, resilience, and a willingness to strive. Role model education serves as a key pathway for conducting patriotic education [2]. Volunteer service serves as a vital avenue for university students to promote and practise core social values, encompassing diverse extracurricular domains such as rural revitalisation, community governance, emergency management, public welfare services, and academic ethos development. The noble qualities and proactive actions demonstrated by outstanding students in volunteer service establish contemporary role models embodying patriotic spirit for their peers. The establishment of a university student volunteer role model repository, which comprehensively identifies, organises, and promotes this vibrant cohort of contemporary exemplars, holds significant practical value. It facilitates the exploration of effective pathways to implement normative requirements for patriotic education, enhances the appeal and efficacy of patriotic education, and educates and guides contemporary university students to unite their hearts and minds, consciously dedicating themselves to the country's modernization construction.

2. The value of the volunteer role model database in patriotic education for university students

2.1 University student volunteer role models embody contemporary Chinese patriotism

Role models embody and practise mainstream values, representing the synthesis of advanced ideas,

conduct, and achievements. They constitute the visible, personified manifestation of mainstream values. Role model education harnesses their exemplary influence and motivational value[3]. By identifying, exploring, promoting, and honouring exemplars, it guides learners towards embracing mainstream values, ultimately enabling them to embody and perpetuate these values through their actions. Traditional Chinese moral education has always placed great emphasis on the role of exemplar education. The Analects, as a Confucian classic, embodies this principle with numerous examples and concepts of exemplary education. For instance, in *The Analects·Yan Yuan*, it states: "The virtue of a gentleman is like the wind; the virtue of a petty person is like the grass. When the wind blows over the grass, it must bend." [4] This expresses how the thoughts and actions of a gentleman, as a moral exemplar, exert a profound guiding influence on ordinary people. Patriotism constitutes the ideological essence of China's outstanding traditional culture. Great figures such as Qu Yuan, Fan Zhongyan, Wen Tianxiang, and Lin Zexu inspired countless patriotic youths in modern times to follow in their footsteps, dedicating themselves to the great struggle for national independence and liberation. Numerous advanced models have been selected and promoted in different periods of China's social development, whose glorious deeds have educated generation after generation of youth. It is widely recognized that people should be adept at learning from advanced models, perfecting themselves bit by bit, cultivating themselves through minor matters and details, and through practical actions learning from the advanced, maintaining advancement, and striving to surpass the advanced.

Patriotism is concrete and tangible. Patriotic education constitutes a vital component of moral education in higher education institutions[5]. When universities conduct patriotic education, they guide students to consciously engage in practical actions that contribute to national development and construction through sustained endeavour. Embracing the volunteer spirit of "dedication, friendship, mutual assistance, and progress," students actively participate in diverse volunteer services. Take the "University Student Volunteer Service Programme for the Western Regions" as an example: by 2024, over 540,000 university students had been deployed to grassroots initiatives in central and western provinces, contributing significantly to basic education, rural development, primary healthcare, and community governance. This experience has not only enhanced their capabilities and tempered their resolve but also strengthened their ideals and convictions[6]. University student volunteer services have been highly recognized, and it is anticipated that increasing numbers of young people will follow the example of student volunteers, go to the grassroots to achieve success, and let the blossoms of youth bloom where the country needs them most. Research indicates that voluntary service effectively fosters patriotism among university students, serving as an effective avenue for patriotic education[7]. Through diverse, proactive, and widespread practical volunteer actions, the youth have embodied contemporary Chinese patriotism. Through prolonged exploration and practice, higher education institutions have gradually established relatively mature mechanisms for university student volunteering. Measures such as awarding credits for extracurricular activities, summer social practice programmes, establishing labour education systems, and revising comprehensive assessment frameworks have actively encouraged students to participate in various volunteer services, yielding positive outcomes. University students have become the main force in volunteer services, demonstrating increasingly proactive attitudes. There is a strong emphasis on improving the volunteer service system and operational framework. Volunteer services will receive further emphasis and development within higher education institutions, while their role in patriotic education for university students will be further highlighted and strengthened.

2.2 The volunteer role model database: vivid material for patriotic education among university students

National policy guidelines on patriotic education emphasize that the core content of patriotic education includes "the deeds of heroic martyrs and exemplary figures, along with the national spirit and spirit of the times they embody; other content rich in patriotic spirit." This highlights the exemplary influence of advanced models, vigorously promoting the various patriotic figures who emerged in different periods of social development, using the power of role models to inspire and encourage people. As vital vehicles for patriotic education, role models exert significant influence through their distinct characteristics, capable of evoking profound intellectual resonance and emotional empathy[8]. Volunteer service exemplars constitute a vibrant group of patriotic role models emerging from the daily lives of university students, undoubtedly possessing significant educational and promotional value. Over the years, higher education institutions have established a stable pattern of recognising this group through commendations, publicity of their deeds, and feature reports during key occasions such as Youth Day and summer social practice summaries, thereby exerting a commendable exemplary and guiding influence.

Case studies, as systematic, comprehensive and inspirational educational resources that integrate theory with practice, effectively combine theoretical innovation with practical outcomes. They play a unique role in education and have garnered significant attention alongside increasingly widespread application[9]. The development of a volunteer role model repository constitutes case-based education within a specific domain. Distinct from traditional role model publicity models, it focuses primarily on university student volunteer role models. Under the guidance of moral education teachers, university student societies conduct structured interviews and standardised collation, with moral education teachers subsequently deepening the content. A comprehensive case includes the volunteer role model's personal information, contextual background, deeds and achievements, observations, reflections, and insights gained during their voluntary service period. Crucially, the repository also incorporates external factors influencing the role model's voluntary participation (such as social calls, familial values shaped by parental example, school education, and personal values). Building upon this foundation, moral education instructors further integrate theories from disciplines such as education, psychology, and pedagogy to conduct theoretical analyses of the exemplary volunteers' behaviours and influencing factors, thereby formulating reflective teaching guidance. The case repository encompasses not only textual materials like original interview transcripts and standardised archives but also visual resources such as photographs and videos documenting the volunteers' service activities. The development of this case repository transforms the traditional, simplistic approach to exemplar education-which often relies solely on illustrative accounts of deeds-by establishing a systematic, standardised, reflective, practical, and highly targeted set of teaching guidance documents. It represents a concrete practice of interdisciplinary integration between moral education theory and other disciplines, while also serving as an objective record and theoretical analysis of the contemporary cohort of volunteer service exemplars. This initiative constitutes a practical step towards refining and standardising the concepts of moral education[10]. The case repository can be utilised not only for patriotic education but also for teaching and reforming moral education courses, fully tapping into the contemporary value of volunteer service role models and providing vivid material for patriotic education among university students.

2.3 The development of the volunteer role model repository represents an innovative practice in grounding patriotic education for university students in real-life contexts

Marx asserted: "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness." [11] Life constitutes both the origin and destination of exemplary education. The influence of such education on learners' behaviour stems from role models serving as external factors that impart indirect experience of the ideal state for individuals as societal members within specific environments. This experience itself originates from the shared lived experience of role models and learners, validated by practical life. Such indirect experience fosters a sense of common ground between learners and role models within shared contexts, guiding learners towards embracing the mainstream values embodied by role models. It further motivates learners to adopt socially expected behaviours when encountering similar situations. This behavioural orientation is not driven by the pursuit of personal gain. As Durkheim observed: "Education is the influence exerted by the older generation upon the generation not yet prepared for social life." [12] This life is not in the physiological sense, but rather refers to purposeful existence[13]-the community shared by both role model and learner. They are not mutual others, but exhibit characteristics of intersubjectivity. Only when the learner embodies the mainstream values promoted through exemplary education in their lived practice does such education realise its inherent value and purpose.

Durkheim posited: "First, if there is one fact that has been historically proven today, it is the close connection between morality and the nature of society. For, as we have already indicated, when society undergoes change, morality also undergoes change." [12] Reflecting on the commonalities among outstanding models in different periods reveals that each embodied the defining themes and prevailing values of their respective eras. Consequently, they resonated profoundly with contemporary audiences, garnering recognition, understanding, identification, and emulation, thereby exerting immense guiding influence. However, as educational practices drifted from practical principles towards scientific formalisation, traditional patriotic exemplar education gradually became detached from the lived experiences of contemporary university students. Contemporary university students inhabit an era of profound transformation marked by economic globalisation, cultural diversity, and the ongoing advancement of social informatisation and intelligence. China's comprehensive national strength and people's living standards have risen rapidly, underpinned by prolonged domestic peace and stability, fostering growing self-confidence and national pride. The modes of knowledge production and dissemination, cognitive approaches, interpersonal interactions, and spiritual needs have all undergone profound transformations. On one hand, contemporary students lack direct, personal experience of the

arduous struggle that defined the historical context of traditional patriotic role models. On the other, influenced by postmodernism, education dominated by instrumental rationality faces the predicament of de-moralisation and de-authorisation[14]. Concurrently, against the backdrop of profound global changes, international relations have become increasingly complex and rapidly evolving, and diverse social ideologies collide and converge, creating confusion and uncertainty regarding value recognition among university students. Concurrently, the traditional top-down selection model for role models, the one-dimensional and overly 'lofty' portrayal of exemplars, and the formulaic nature of educational approaches have created an unattainable, distant perception among learners. This fails to resonate with their inner selves and suppresses their sense of self-efficacy. Role model education has thus fallen into an inefficient state of disconnection from students' lives. It is increasingly recognized that adapting to circumstances, advancing with the times, and innovating with changing trends is essential for advancing moral education in higher education institutions under new tasks and in new eras.

Patriotism remains a core value among contemporary university students. Yet translating patriotic spirit into tangible daily actions continues to challenge many students and represents a persistent difficulty in patriotic education. Voluntary service encompasses numerous spheres of life beyond the classroom, with every university student acting as a participant, witness, and direct experimenter. The role models of voluntary service are the living, breathing individuals visible, audible, and accessible to university students. Heroes once perceived as distant figures are now familiar classmates and friends. Through concrete actions, they demonstrate autonomous, self-directed, and proactive agency, achieving extraordinary accomplishments in seemingly ordinary endeavours while realising personal value and societal recognition. Patriotism ceases to be an abstract concept or hollow slogan, becoming instead the ordinary, minute, tangible, and concrete work of daily life. Volunteer service role models have evolved from objects of patriotic education into subjects of patriotic practice, completing the transformation from "internalisation in the heart" to "externalisation in action." This shift inherently carries profound and rich implications for patriotic education. For contemporary university students, volunteer service role models inhabit the same lived world, making them approachable, credible, and worthy of emulation. Consequently, the development of a volunteer service role model repository represents an innovative practice in reintegrating patriotic education into the lives of today's university students.

3. Pathways for patriotic education among university students based on the volunteer role model case library

3.1 Vigorous promotion of contemporary Chinese patriotic spirit among university students

The Great Learning states: "He who wishes to cultivate his character must first rectify his heart; he who wishes to rectify his heart must first make his intentions sincere; he who wishes to make his intentions sincere must first acquire knowledge, and knowledge is acquired through the investigation of things." [4] Role model education, as an intermediary, derives its efficacy from the alignment between the values conveyed by role models and the learners' value cognition and spiritual needs formed under the influence of their surroundings. To advance patriotic education among university students through a volunteer role model database, we must first widely disseminate the connotation of contemporary Chinese patriotism, vigorously promote the spirit of patriotism in contemporary China, and guide students to correctly understand its defining themes, essential manifestations, and distinctive characteristics. Guided by Marxist theoretical perspective and drawing on achievements from volunteer initiatives such as the Postgraduate Teaching Support Group and community service, we should lead students to deeply contemplate their mission and responsibilities in this era. Deepening education on national and social development history should help students understand the historical and developmental trajectory of contemporary Chinese patriotism, enhance students' capacity to scientifically discern diverse social ideologies, and thereby consolidate the primacy of contemporary Chinese patriotism within the mainstream values held by university students.

3.2 Empowering university students as active participants in patriotic education

Upholding student agency is a defining feature of the volunteer role model repository, evident throughout its development. When employing this repository for patriotic education, it is essential to fully leverage students' active participation, stimulate self-reflection and intrinsic motivation, and encourage them to proactively embody and perpetuate patriotic values. Integrating the repository into moral education courses and curriculum-based moral development requires timely adjustments to teaching methodologies in accordance with the repository's guidelines. Employing case-based teaching

and flipped classroom approaches enhances student engagement and participation in classroom learning, addressing and resolving their internal uncertainties and questions. Through themed activities organised by grassroots student organisations, students-particularly those featured in the exemplar repository-should be encouraged to deliver reports and engage in exchanges. This leverages the strengths of peer-to-peer communication to enhance the relatability and impact of volunteer service role model education, deepen the influence of exemplars on university students, and boost students' sense of self-efficacy in learning from these models. Integrate the promotion of volunteer role models as a core component of campus culture development. Leverage multimedia formats popular among students-such as social media platforms, animations, and cartoons-alongside contemporary online discourses to widely disseminate the deeds of volunteer exemplars. When promoting these role models, take particular care to avoid the overly elevated, abstract, and formal expressions common in traditional propaganda that detach from everyday life. Strengthen care and support for volunteer role models to enhance their sense of pride and self-discipline, encouraging continuous growth and progress while maintaining their credibility and exemplary status.

3.3 Establishing practical platforms for university students to promote patriotism

It is widely acknowledged that young people should commit themselves to serving the nation and its communities, embodying patriotic sentiment through lifelong devotion and tenacious endeavour. While "patriotism" as a value is abstract, its manifestation is concrete and practical. Utilising the volunteer role model database for patriotic education among university students should highlight the specific actions through which these role models practise patriotism. All practices contributing to national development and modernization constitute concrete manifestations of patriotism. On the one hand, university students fulfilling their fundamental duty by diligently studying and enhancing their capabilities to lay a solid foundation for participating in national construction inherently embody the spirit of patriotism. On the other hand, acquiring scientific knowledge, actively participating in diverse volunteer services, cultivating a sense of national pride and international perspective, continuously enhancing lifelong learning and development capabilities, and making contributions where the country requires them, also constitute concrete manifestations of patriotic spirit. Therefore, the promotion of volunteer role models should permeate every aspect of university students' practical activities and daily life, with the effectiveness of such role model education being tested through practice.

3.4 Improving the long-term mechanism for building a volunteer role model database

Young people are increasingly motivated to aspire to become outstanding youth who possess ideals, take responsibility, endure hardship, and strive diligently, allowing their youth to blossom brilliantly in the fervent practice of national modernization construction. China has embarked upon a new journey towards national modernization. Contemporary university students bear significant responsibilities and a glorious mission. Only by consistently upholding the spirit of patriotism and striving collectively can we promote the continuous development of the country. The development of the volunteer role model database represents an innovative practice in patriotic education, providing not only a wealth of youth role models but also a comprehensive framework and methodology for its construction. The path ahead will not be without challenges, and new role models embodying the spirit of the times will inevitably emerge. Therefore, we must refine the long-term mechanisms for developing this repository. On one hand, we should track and enhance the development of existing role models, promptly incorporating new achievements while replacing those no longer suitable for promotion. On the other hand, we must diligently collect and organise emerging role models to enrich and expand the repository. Accelerating the development of an online sharing platform for both repository construction and utilisation is essential. The repository must consistently remain attuned to the lives and development of university students, thereby maximising its educational significance for their growth.

4. Conclusion

National policy guidelines on patriotic education emphasize that patriotic education should be conducted among all citizens, nurturing and deepening affection for the Chinese nation and the motherland, passing on the national spirit, strengthening the concept of the nation, and uniting all patriotic forces to make patriotism the firm conviction, spiritual strength, and conscious action of the entire people. Volunteer services, characterised by diverse forms, rich content, and broad scope, constitute an integral part of contemporary university students' lives and form cherished memories of their youth. They

effectively strengthen students' patriotic sentiments, serving as a vivid practical lesson in patriotic education. The development and application of a volunteer role model repository represent a valuable exploration and practice in innovating patriotic education pathways. This initiative assists in educating university students to deeply comprehend the profound connotations of contemporary Chinese patriotism, guiding them to actively embody this patriotism through concrete actions. It further advances the implementation of national education development guidelines, promotes core social values, and accelerates the establishment of a high-quality moral education system within higher education institutions.

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