

# Mechanism Construction and Pathway Optimization for Integrating Volunteering into College Ideological and Political Education from the Perspective of Practice-Based Education

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## Abstract

Practice-based education represents a strategic initiative in higher education for fulfilling the fundamental mission of “cultivating virtue through education” (lǐde shùen) in the new era. Voluntary service serves as a critical vehicle bridging ideological and political theory with social practice, inherently possessing value-shaping and normative functions. However, the integration of voluntary service into ideological and political education in Chinese universities currently faces significant challenges, including the absence of coordinated mechanisms, fragmented implementation, and insufficient pedagogical depth. Grounded in practice-based education theory, this study systematically analyzes the intrinsic logic underlying the synergy between voluntary service and ideological and political education. Drawing on empirical data from questionnaire surveys and case studies, it identifies key practical obstacles and proposes an integrated institutional framework across four dimensions: organizational coordination, competency-oriented training, multidimensional evaluation and incentive mechanisms, and resource integration—further institutionalizing these components through policy design. Building on this mechanism, the paper advances four optimized implementation pathways: curricular embedding, project-based operation, digital enablement, and societal collaboration, all validated through representative domestic and international cases. The study aims to catalyze a paradigm shift—from episodic, activity-driven participation toward systematic, educative cultivation—and thereby provide both theoretical grounding and actionable strategies for constructing a high-quality ideological and political education system.

## Keywords

Practice-based education; Voluntary service; Ideological and political education; Pathway optimization.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese state has placed increasing emphasis on the foundational role of practice-based education in talent development. A series of policy documents—including Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in Institutions of Higher Learning (2017), the Guidelines for Curriculum-Based Ideological and Political Education in Higher Education (2020), and the Work Plan for Comprehensively Advancing the Construction of “Great Ideological and Political Courses” (2022)—consistently underscore the importance of practice-based education and call for deep integration between social practice and ideological and political education (IPE) [1]. The Education Power National Strategy Outline (2024–2035) further articulates the goal of “establishing a holistic education system that fosters moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor development,” explicitly

highlighting the critical role of labor education and voluntary service in talent cultivation and advocating their full incorporation into the entire educational process [2].

At the academic level, scholarly interest in integrating voluntary service with IPE has grown steadily in China. Wang Yi et al. describe voluntary service as a “mobile ideological and political classroom,” emphasizing its irreplaceable capacity for affective immersion [3]. Liu Hongda argues that digital technologies can enhance the precision and sustainability of volunteer programs [4], while Zhang Tianju focuses on organizational management and calls for institutionalized university–community coordination mechanisms [5]. Nevertheless, existing research is often limited to experiential summaries or isolated pathway analyses, lacking systematic mechanism design and interdisciplinary theoretical integration.

Internationally, service-learning—which emerged in North America and Europe in the 1980s—has become a cornerstone of liberal arts education. Centered on the cyclical process of “preparation–action–reflection–demonstration,” it deliberately integrates community service with academic coursework to simultaneously advance knowledge application and civic competence [6]. In contrast, although China boasts one of the world’s largest volunteer forces, its programs often prioritize quantity over quality and service delivery over learning outcomes. A coherent, locally rooted, closed-loop model that fully realizes educative (yuren) objectives—particularly one with distinctive Chinese characteristics—has yet to be established.

Scholars have observed that while formal schooling greatly enhances the efficiency of knowledge transmission, it may also lead to a disconnection between knowing and doing due to its reliance on textbook-based instruction. Social practice, by introducing rich real-life materials into education, transforms teaching into a dynamic, open, and evolving process—turning education into “living water” full of vitality. Integrating voluntary service into college students’ ideological and political education offers multiple dimensions of value:

**Theoretical Enrichment:** This research provides novel theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks for IPE, thereby enriching scholarly discourse in educational studies.

**Advancement of Integration Paradigms:** The proposed integration model advances both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of cross-domain collaboration, facilitating resource sharing and synergistic development across fields.

**Innovation in Educational Practice:** It fosters pedagogical innovation, enhancing teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

**Holistic Student Development:** It further stimulates students’ motivation and interest in learning, cultivates critical thinking, leadership, and social responsibility, and supports well-rounded personal growth.

**Societal Contribution:** By merging voluntary action with ideological education, this approach nurtures a new generation of socially responsible and innovative youth, injecting fresh energy into national development and social progress.

Thus, the integration of voluntary service and ideological and political education holds significant theoretical and practical value. Through in-depth research and empirical exploration, integration models and pathways can be continuously refined and optimized—thereby elevating educational quality, supporting students’ comprehensive development, and making meaningful contributions to societal advancement. Against this backdrop, this study draws upon practice-based education theory and synthesizes multidisciplinary perspectives from education, sociology, and ideological-political pedagogy. Using mixed-methods empirical investigation, it reveals current challenges and systematically constructs an integrated “mechanism–pathway–support” framework, aiming for dual breakthroughs in both theoretical depth and practical applicability.

## 2. Theoretical Logic of Integrating Voluntary Service with Ideological and Political Education from the Perspective of Practice-Based Education

### (1) Goal Alignment: Consistency in Value Shaping

The fundamental mission of ideological and political education (IPE) is to “cultivate new-era individuals capable of shouldering the great task of national rejuvenation.” Voluntary service, through its core values of “dedication, friendship, mutual aid, and progress,” guides students toward self-identity realization while serving others. Both IPE and voluntary service are highly aligned in fostering socialist core values and enhancing the “Four Confidences” (confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics).

### (2) Process Coupling: Transformative Experiential Learning

Kolb’s experiential learning theory posits that effective learning involves a cyclical process encompassing four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation[7]. Voluntary service provides students with authentic social contexts beyond textbooks, enabling them to deepen their understanding of labor ethics by addressing real-world issues such as caring for left-behind children, community eldercare, and rural education. This approach helps overcome the “knowing–doing gap” inherent in traditional teaching methods.

### (3) Role Modeling through Social Learning Theory

Bandura’s social learning theory emphasizes that individuals achieve socialization through observing and imitating exemplary behaviors[8]. Notable volunteer cases—such as figures featured in “People Who Moved China” or presenters at volunteer sharing sessions—serve as vivid materials for implicit ideological education. For universities, establishing role models within the campus community and fostering a culture where everyone is willing to serve and grow can effectively facilitate implicit education.

### (4) Localization Insights from Service-Learning

Service-learning underscores the principle that learning occurs through service, and service enhances learning, necessitating bidirectional alignment between community needs and course objectives. For example, agricultural science students participating in soil improvement and pest management for crops not only assist grassroots agricultural departments in boosting production efficiency but also deepen their understanding of subjects like plant protection and soil science through practical application. This model effectively bridges the gap between specialized studies and voluntary service, providing a valuable paradigm for promoting an integrated “specialization + volunteerism” educative framework.

These theoretical foundations underscore the potential synergies between voluntary service and ideological-political education, highlighting how practice-based education can enrich both the pedagogical process and student development.

## 3. Key Challenges in Current Integration Practices (Evidence from Empirical Research)

In the first half of 2025, this study conducted a mixed-methods investigation across ten universities in the Sichuan–Chongqing region, including three “Double First-Class” institutions, four general undergraduate universities, and three application-oriented universities. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 400 valid responses. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 20 students, 8 faculty members, and 5 community workers.

### 3.1. Absence of Coordinated Organizational Mechanisms

Nearly 80% of interviewed students reported uncertainty about which university department is responsible for integrating ideological and political education (IPE) into voluntary service. In practice, departments such as the Communist Youth League Committee, Student Affairs Office, and School of Marxism often operate in silos. One volunteer program coordinator remarked, “We expend considerable effort just on recruitment and attendance tracking; assessing IPE outcomes is extremely difficult, let alone institutionalizing management processes.”

### 3.2. Superficial Service Content with Low Professional Relevance

Approximately 60% of students indicated that service activities are repetitive, lack challenge, and rarely connect to their academic disciplines. Architecture students frequently complained: “I’ve participated multiple times in ‘community elder visits,’ but my skills in spatial planning and drafting are completely unused.” Similarly, computer science students noted participating in “community clean-up days” for three consecutive years, lamenting, “My coding abilities have absolutely no outlet here.”

### 3.3. Fragmented Training Systems

Nearly 90% of respondents stated that pre-service training is infrequent and limited to basic instructions—such as safety guidelines, sign-in procedures, and general reminders. A psychological hotline volunteer at one university candidly shared: “Our only training was a single lecture on ‘active listening.’ We received no systematic instruction on crisis assessment, suicide risk identification, referral protocols, or ethical boundaries. When I received a call with explicit self-harm intent, I felt anxious and helpless due to the lack of operational guidance.” This highlights an urgent need to embed professional supervision and standardized intervention protocols into mental health volunteering.

In international event volunteering, students also reported mismatches between assigned roles and language competencies. One participant noted: “Despite being tasked with translation duties, we weren’t provided with specialized glossaries, intercultural communication strategies, or emergency response scripts. When foreign attendees filed complaints or asked for directions, we often failed to respond effectively due to information gaps.” This underscores that language-based volunteering equally demands contextualized, professional support.

### 3.4. Overly Simplified Evaluation Mechanisms

Current evaluation systems in Chinese universities overwhelmingly rely on service hours as the primary metric. More than 90% of merit-based awards use quantitative thresholds—such as “accumulating 30 service hours”—as the main criterion. This incentivizes students to prioritize quantity over quality, leading to practices like proxy check-ins and inflated hour reporting. As one student admitted: “I had a friend clock in for me—no one ever verifies it.” Such simplistic incentives not only foster a transactional, hour-chasing mentality but also erode the educative value and intrinsic meaning of voluntary service.

### 3.5. Insufficient Post-Service Reflection and Erosion of Educative Outcomes

Most universities lack institutionalized reflection mechanisms. Only 12.3% of programs incorporate structured reflective components—such as guided group discussions, reflective journaling, or thematic debrief sessions. Consequently, the majority of students disengage immediately after completing service tasks, resulting in a superficial “do-and-done” participation pattern. Without professional facilitation, students struggle to transform emotional experiences into rational understanding or internalized values. Their comprehension of social issues remains surface-level, and the synergistic development of professional competence and civic responsibility is hindered—ultimately constraining the deeper potential of voluntary service as a vehicle for practice-based education.

## 4. Systematic Construction of Integration Mechanisms

### 4.1. Organizational Mechanism: "Party Leadership, Multi-Sector Collaboration"

Top-Level Design: Establish a university-level "Volunteer Service and Ideological and Political Education Coordination Center." The operational process includes: the School of Marxism setting educational goals → the Communist Youth League issuing projects → secondary colleges organizing registrations → the Student Affairs Office tracking ideological development → the Academic Affairs Office recognizing credits → community partners providing feedback → the center conducting annual evaluations.

**Table 1.** Competency-Based Tiered Training Program

Level	Target Group	Core Content	Format
Foundational	All Volunteers	Volunteer ethos, safety protocols, ethical guidelines	Online MOOC (2 hrs) + offline lecture
Professional	Project Members	Teaching methods for tutoring, community research, digital literacy for seniors	Workshops + mentorship (4 hrs)
Leadership	Project Leads	Project management, team leadership, crisis response	Case studies + simulations (6 hrs)

Institutional Safeguards: Enact Implementation Measures for Integrating Voluntary Service into Ideological and Political Education, clearly defining responsibilities and evaluation criteria for each department.

### 4.2. Training Empowerment Mechanism: "Tiered and Categorized, Competency Progression"

Develop modular training programs tailored to different types of services (e.g., mental health support, legal aid, environmental monitoring), culminating in digital micro-certificates that are recorded in the official "Second Classroom Transcript."

Note: Qualified trainees will receive electronic certificates, which are included in the "Second Classroom Transcript."

### 4.3. Evaluation and Incentive Mechanism: "Process Recording + Growth Profiling"

To enhance the precision and visibility of educative outcomes in voluntary service, develop a "Volunteer Growth Portfolio" digital system to systematically document students' entire participation journey. This system includes structured service logs (including weekly reflective journals), 360-degree multidimensional evaluations from mentors and service recipients, self-assessment radar charts based on core competencies (such as communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, etc.), and a reflective report of no less than 1,000 words on ideological insights. These components comprehensively reflect students' cognitive deepening, competency progression, and value recognition throughout their practice. Based on data integration and intelligent analysis, personalized "educational efficacy profiles" are generated, serving as critical references for honors selection, graduate school recommendations, and employment endorsements. This approach transforms volunteer service from mere experience accumulation to profound growth empowerment, achieving an organic unity between process-based evaluation and outcome-based application.

#### **4.4. Resource Integration Mechanism: "University-Community Co-construction, Resource Sharing"**

Universities should strengthen collaboration with communities and social organizations to promote the normalization and professionalization of voluntary service. Jointly establish "Community Ideological and Political Practice Stations" with subdistrict offices to provide stable service positions for students; collaborate with non-profit organizations to develop "professional service kits," such as legal consultations and environmental monitoring, leveraging students' specialized skills. Additionally, set up an annual "Volunteer Seed Fund" of RMB 500,000 to support student-led innovative service projects, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of practical education.

These mechanisms aim to create a comprehensive framework that ensures the seamless integration of voluntary service into ideological and political education, fostering a robust environment for student growth and development.

### **5. Optimization Strategies and Model Cases for Integration Pathways**

#### **5.1. Curriculum Embedding: Building a "First Classroom + Second Classroom" Integration Model**

To deepen the educational function of voluntary service, many universities are exploring ways to integrate it into formal curricula. For example, Fudan University offers a general course titled Public Welfare and Social Innovation, where 40% of the credits are awarded for volunteer practice. Students must submit detailed service plans, process records, and reflective reports, forming a closed-loop education model encompassing learning, thinking, practicing, and understanding. Chengdu Institute of Technology piloted adding a "Community Service Week" in its Moral Education and Law course, requiring students to complete the entire experience from needs assessment, plan design, implementation, to feedback, thereby strengthening the integration of theory and practice.

#### **5.2. Project-Based Operation: Aligning with National Strategic Needs**

University volunteer services are becoming increasingly professionalized and branded by aligning with national strategic needs. Tsinghua University's "Rural Revitalization Workstation" project organizes students to conduct multi-dimensional services such as planning and design, e-commerce training, and cultural exploration during winter and summer breaks. This project has covered 25 provinces across China, creating a sustainable development model integrating service, research, and feedback. Zhejiang University's "Digital Assistance for the Elderly" project, developed by computer science students, helps seniors learn to use health codes and registration systems through simple apps, winning the gold medal at the National Volunteer Service Competition and showcasing effective alignment between academic expertise and social needs.

#### **5.3. Digital Support: Establishing Smart Volunteer Platforms**

Modern information technology is used to build intelligent volunteer management platforms. These platforms may include AI smart matching systems that recommend suitable positions based on students' majors, interests, and schedules; VR simulation training modules for virtual drills in emergency rescue scenarios; and big data analytics to generate personal growth trend charts, supporting personalized development. For instance, Zhejiang University's "Volunteer Hub" platform boasts over 50,000 users, improving project matching efficiency by 60%, significantly enhancing the organizational effectiveness of volunteer services.

#### **5.4. Societal Collaboration: Establishing Dissemination and Feedback Mechanisms**

To expand the social impact of volunteer services and enhance students' sense of value, universities should actively establish societal collaboration mechanisms. Examples include co-producing documentaries with local TV stations, setting up "Volunteer Service Achievement Exhibition Halls" in communities, and regularly hosting "Service Recipient Appreciation Sharing Sessions." Such activities promote the exchange and dissemination of volunteer experiences, greatly increasing students' sense of achievement and social responsibility derived from participating in volunteer services.

### **6. Assurance System for Integrated Advancement**

#### **6.1. Strengthening Institutional Safeguards**

Voluntary service should be integrated into university talent cultivation systems as an essential carrier of practice-based education, included in all major talent cultivation programs, with a minimum requirement of 1–2 mandatory credits established through institutional measures. Accompanying guidelines, such as Detailed Rules for Volunteer Service Credit Recognition, should specify scientific standards for service content, duration, outcome formats, and evaluation methods, ensuring fairness, transparency, and educational quality in credit recognition, avoiding tendencies towards formality over substance.

#### **6.2. Enhancing Team Support**

High-quality volunteer services require professional and diverse guidance forces. Universities should cultivate a "dual-teacher" volunteer service mentor team, combining the ideological leadership strengths of political education teachers, technical support capabilities of professional teachers, and practical experience of mentors from social organizations, forming a collaborative guidance framework centered on values, professionalism, and practice. Additionally, establishing dedicated "volunteer service counselor" roles at the department or university level can enhance systematicness, professionalism, and educational outcomes in volunteer services.

#### **6.3. Financial Assurance**

Financial assurance is crucial for the sustainable development of university volunteer services. A funding mechanism primarily supported by university investments but supplemented by multiple channels is necessary. Universities should set aside special budgets for volunteer services, allocating no less than RMB 50 per student annually, to ensure the orderly conduct of foundational activities. Moreover, expanding external resources through government service procurement projects, corporate social responsibility sponsorships, and alumni donations can create a diversified, sustainable financial support system, providing solid backing for the professionalization, normalization, and high-quality development of volunteer services.

#### **6.4. Cultural Assurance**

Due to information asymmetry and limited publicity channels, some volunteer service projects have low influence and participation rates. Thus, building a specialized volunteer service publicity platform combining online and offline approaches is essential. Offline events like exhibitions, lectures, and workshops increase exposure and engagement, while online social media accounts (such as official accounts and QQ groups) disseminate information about volunteer activities, share stories, and provide useful updates. Ensuring close connections between the platform and target audiences facilitates information dissemination and interactive exchanges.

In conclusion, under the context of developing new productive forces and advancing Digital China, higher education institutions need to transcend traditional classroom boundaries, transforming from “closed teaching” to “open practice.” Volunteering should not merely serve as an auxiliary extracurricular activity but rather be systematically established as a core practical vehicle. With emerging technologies like AI, big data, and VR deeply integrated into societal operations and educational settings, volunteer services face higher structural demands. Universities must aim at practice-based education, constructing a comprehensive “mechanism—pathway—assurance” integration system to genuinely foster well-rounded socialist builders and successors who possess both virtue and talent, achieving unity of knowledge and action.

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