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The Impact of a Military Base on Community Volunteering: A Case Study

Keywords

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The Impact of a Military Base on Community Volunteering: A Case Study

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The importance of military personnel to the nonprofit sector of a community was underscored several years ago when the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance Program at LSU in Shreveport was contacted by a Staff Sergeant who had recently been transferred to Barksdale Air Force Base in Bossier City, Louisiana. He had been involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters for fifteen years and was surprised that there was no program in the Shreveport-Bossier Metropolitan Area. Because of his strong beliefs in the positive impact of the Big Brother Big Sister Program on the lives of children and adolescents, he began to organize a chapter. It was a journey of several years but resulted in The Extra Mile, Region 7 sponsoring the program which rapidly grew to 50 matches.

The formation of a nonprofit organization as the result of Barksdale Air Force Base personnel efforts in the community was not unique. The base has been in existence since 1926 and had over 6,000 active duty military personnel plus many civilian employees at the time of this study. Not only did base personnel occasionally form nonprofit organizations but they volunteer as soccer coaches, Boy Scout and Girl Scout leaders, church members, etc. The impact on the local nonprofit community of spouses and other family members could be considerable. This case study examines and documents the voluntary activities of Barksdale Air Force Base military personnel.

Relevant Literature Regarding the Study

Community volunteering is an integral part of the United States Air Force (myairforcevolunteer.com). Bases are basically self-contained cities that also relate and impact the civilian communities where they are located (www.airforce.com/lifestyle/live-on-base). At the time of this case study, promotion was based not only on technical job performance criteria

but also on an ideology known as the “whole person Concept” which included the extent of community volunteerism. Today, volunteer involvement is no longer a promotion criteria.

The Air Force expectation of volunteerism was collectivistic-based volunteerism, which is characterized by being group coordinated, induced, and sometimes even compelled. Eckstein (2001) found that collectivistic-based volunteerism defied traditional ideas about who volunteers and why. Instead of the typical middle-class, individual voluntary behaviors that were reported by Bellah (2007), group volunteerism may be more tied to the norms of the group. In the case of the Air Force, it was the idea of the whole person. “Being a whole person” who excels at every aspect of life and makes a deliberate effort to make a difference (airforceourway.com/2015/08/26/which person concept). The whole person strives to be the best at the job among their peers before they start doing something outside of their work. A whole person always has a positive attitude and may not necessarily be the best at their work but is known for striving to be. Regarding the community, the whole person makes a difference. Volunteering is the hours devoted to a task with a nonprofit but making a difference is about quality, making the community a better place to live. Quality is about assuming leadership positions to make things happen in community serving nonprofits.

Organizational ideology such as “being a whole person” and its impact on persons has been recognized in the complex organization literature at least since the 1950s (Perrow 1972: 61-67). It was the work of Rinehard Bendix (1965) who pointed out the clash in USA factories between Darwinist ideology about “survival of the fittest” and the democratic ideology of liberty and equality for all. The titans of industry embraced the Darwinist ideology in the early 1900s imposing on subordinates the duty of obedience and obligation to serve their employer. It was not until the rise of scientific management by Frederick W. Taylor that an ideology of “finding

the work that best fit a person's natural abilities "replaced the Darwinist ideology with its emphasis on personal and arbitrary authority in the work place.

Today, organizational ideology is well recognized as part of an organization's culture (Martin 1992, Handel 2003). In attempting to engineer culture and accomplish normative control, organizational members are seen to be driven by strong beliefs among other attributes. Yet, the organizations produce members who also question the authority of beliefs and are apprehensive of expectations for their behavior. Beside the central place of ideology in explaining Air Force personnel community volunteering, there are other factors to consider.

Demographics have an impact. When poverty and unemployment are low in an area, individuals tend to be more likely to volunteer their time and give to nonprofit organizations, thus indicating higher levels of civic engagement within certain communities. Military bases are areas in which unemployment is non-existent and though salaries may not be high, financial incentives such as housing or educational assistance do exist. Bases provide a pool of volunteers that enhance services for both the base itself and the surrounding civilian community. While this is a positive factor for volunteerism, the negative demographic characteristic of bases is their high transitory population leading to high migration in and out of their geographical area.

High migration tends to have lower levels of civic engagement, but this could be countered by the fact that military bases provide networking to new transfers and facilitation of voluntary efforts both on and off- base. (Tolbert, Lyson, and Irwin, 1998)

A final factor impacting on base volunteerism may be work performed, the military may be predisposed to increased voluntary efforts. Wilson and Musick (1997) found that public-sector employees were more likely to volunteer than were private sector employees and that this may be explained by the fact that their jobs "come closer to a calling" resulting in less

differentiation between “their work and private lives.” Such work is indicative of the military and may well offer insight into their volunteerism.

The media has highlighted the importance of the military to a community’s voluntary base, especially when military bases close. When Cannon Air Force Base was placed on the Base Realignment and Closure List (BRAC) in 2005, not only were personal and economic impacts mentioned, but also noted was “the void would be felt in social services – from Habitat for Humanity to youth scouting troops – that thrive because of the military’s volunteerism (Aguayo, 2005)”. Other municipalities such as San Angelo, Texas, the home of Goodfellow Air Force Base, echo the importance of the military to their voluntary base. (Christenson, 2005)

The case presented compares volunteerism of base personnel with a convenience sample of the surrounding community to determine whether the volunteer experiences of Barksdale Air Force Base personnel were unique or consistent with the experiences of the general population surrounding it.

Methodology

Contact was established with the Base Commander of Barksdale Air Force Base in Bossier City, Louisiana. Once the Commander’s interest was established, the Research Office for the Air Command in San Antonio, Texas was contacted and permission was granted to conduct a survey of military and civilian workers on base. With the assistance of the Chief Operations Officer of Barksdale Air Force Base, an internet survey was constructed and piloted in the spring of 2006. The survey was then administered via the Internet to approximately 7,000 military and civilian personnel during the months of December, 2005 and January, 2006. A total of 445 surveys were completed. Those not answering, who were unsure, or didn’t know were

excluded from the final results. Comparisons are made to *Volunteering in the United States, 2005*, a supplement of the *Current Population Survey*, The Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In Spring of 2007, the original survey was revised and through the local newspaper website, was offered online to residents of the surrounding community. The survey was hosted by the newspaper and an accompanying story regarding the original survey was printed. Over the course of two weeks, 95 surveys were completed. This was a convenience sample and in no way constitutes generalizability to the larger community. However, we felt that those who completed the survey might be people in the community who were more invested in the topic and might provide the basis for a larger study if our hypotheses held true.

Case Analysis

As shown in Table 1, the demographic results for the base sample reveal that the military sample was younger, male (70%) and married (72%) whereas in the general population the sample was older, female (64%) and about equally split between married and not married. Education levels were also varied with about equal numbers of college and post-graduates; however, of the military sample, 50% reported having some college (the largest category for the group). The military sample also showed more racial diversity, but the two groups reported very similar church attendance rates as well as distribution rates for the various religious affiliations.

Table 1

Demographic Results for Sample Population

	<i>Shreveport- Bossier Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>Military Base Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>2005 Current Population Survey Percent of Population who volunteered</i>
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	36%	70%	25%
Female	64%	30%	32%
<i>Marital Status</i>			
Married	58%	72%	56%
Not married	42%	28%	44%
<i>Age¹</i>			
24 years old or less	5%	16%	24%
25-35 years old	22%	27%	24%
36-45 years old	27%	45%	34%
46-55 years old	29%	10%	32%
56 years old or older	17%	3%	27%
<i>Education</i>			
High School graduate	17%	7%	21%
Some college	32%	50%	34%
College graduate	36%	31%	46%
Post-graduate degree	15%	13%	
<i>Race</i>			
White or Caucasian	86%	67%	30.4%
Black or African American	13%	20%	22.1%
Other	1%	13%	
<i>Church Attendance</i>			
Yes	83%	78%	
No	17%	22%	
<i>Religious Affiliation (check all that apply)</i>			
Baptist	40%	44%	
Roman Catholic	16%	21%	
Methodist	17%	9%	
Lutheran	1%	3%	
Presbyterian	0%	2%	
Episcopalian	2%	2%	
Other	18%	25%	
None	6%	7%	

¹ Categories for the current population survey were 25-34 yrs., 35-44 yrs., 45-54 yrs., 55-64 yrs., and 65 yrs., older. They are not totally compatible with the Air Force Survey

Comparing the base and general population sample to the population from the 2005 Current Population Survey, about one fourth of men and one third of women in America did volunteer work for various nonprofit and grassroots organizations. The volunteer sample from CPS more closely matched the general population in our survey, but differences remained.

Table 2 reports respondent's work and military status as well as the level of support for volunteering they perceive from their supervisor. Most of those who responded to the base survey were active duty (78%) and of those in the military, 74% were enlisted. Only about 11% of the respondents were civilian. The results indicate that within the work culture of the Air Force, there appears to be a strong emphasis on volunteering by persons in supervisory positions. Over 86% of the respondents stated that their direct supervisor was either supportive or very supportive of their voluntary efforts. In the general population, it was clear that while many of the respondents receive support from their supervisors for volunteering (65%), a higher percentage reported that their supervisor was neutral (17%) or that they were unsure of their supervisor's feelings, again reinforcing the culture of volunteering that appears to be evident in the Air force.

Table 2
Work Status, Military Rank, and Work-related Volunteer Support

	<i>Shreveport-Bossier Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>Military Base Sample Percent of Sample</i>
<i>Respondent's Status</i>		
Active Duty	n/a	78%
Reserve	n/a	7%
GS employee	n/a	8%
Civilian	n/a	11%
<i>Current Ranking</i>		
Officer	n/a	14%
Enlisted	n/a	74%
GS employee	n/a	12%
<i>Supervisor's Support for Volunteering</i>		
Very Supportive	39%	47%
Supportive	26%	39%
Neutral	17%	8%
Not Supportive	4%	3%
Very Unsupportive	0%	1%
Unsure	14%	2%

Again, the culture of volunteerism in the Air force appeared evident when respondents in both samples were asked about their and their family's voluntary habits. Table 3 shows that 85% of Air Force respondents had been asked to volunteer and the person most likely to have asked them to volunteer was someone at work (44%) followed by a friend (20%). In the community sample, voluntary rates were also high (72%), though not as high as those in the military. Also, the community sample was more likely to have been asked to volunteer by a friend (47%) than those in the military. In the general population, the *Current Population Survey* reports 31% of United States citizens have been asked to volunteer, 2% by their boss, and 14% by a friend, relative, or co-worker. Base respondents clearly volunteer at a higher level and are much more likely to do this through work.

Table 3**Voluntary Habits**

	<i>Shreveport-Bossier Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>Military Base Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>2005 Current Population Survey Percent of Population</i>
<i>Asked to Volunteer?</i>			
Yes	72%	85%	31% in general population
No	28%	15%	
<i>If yes, who asked you?</i>			
Someone at work	22%	44%	
Friend	47%	20%	
Family or Relative	27%	5%	
Other	45%	13%	
<i>Who volunteers in my family</i>			
Self	53%	71%	
Spouse	28%	42%	
Teens	12%	17%	
Other Adults	15%	7%	
No one	46%	18%	
<i>Of those who volunteer:</i>			
<i>Began Volunteering at what age?</i>			
12 years old or less	12%	16%	
13 to 18 years old	28%	23%	
19-25 years old	30%	36%	
26 years old or older	30%	26%	
<i>Volunteer on or off base?</i>			
On	n/a	4%	
Off	n/a	29%	
Both	n/a	67%	
<i>Areas of Volunteerism? (check all that apply)</i>			
Religious	28%	52%	35%
Human Services	15%	45%	13%
Education	15%	42%	26%
Youth Development	18%	39%	48%
Environment	8%	33%	2%
Health	11%	25%	8%
International Foreign	2%	5%	
<i>How much time in a week spent volunteering?</i>			
1 to 4 hours	71%	81%	
5-9 hours	22%	13%	
10 or more hours	7%	6%	

The Current Population Survey data is based on Table 4: Volunteers by type of main organization for which volunteer activities were performed and select characteristics, September 2005 and also Table 5: Volunteers activities for main organization for which volunteer activities were performed and select characteristics, 2005

Table 3 also indicates that 70% of the base respondents currently volunteer along with 42% of their spouses. The community sample shows that either only the person answering the survey or no one were the most likely answers. In the general population, about one-third of American adults volunteer. Of those who currently volunteer, base respondents began doing so at all stages of life while the community sample reflected the same. The base personnel generally devote 4 hours or less per week to volunteering as did those in the community sample. Base personnel volunteer considerably more than the general population who report a median of 50 hours a year volunteering because 81% of base respondents reported volunteering at least one hour a week and 29% reported 260 to over 520 hours a year if you convert their weekly reported volunteer hours into a yearly figure.

When asked about area of volunteer involvement, Table 3 indicates that 52% of base respondents said “religious”, 45% stated ‘human services”, 42% “education”, and 39% “youth development”. Among the general population, 35% indicated involvement in “youth development, “religious organizations had 35% and 26% indicated involvement in educational organizations. For the community sample, it appears as those most volunteer in religious organizations as well. Religion and education are the two main areas of volunteer involvement for the base respondents and it is youth development and religion for the general population.

Reasons for volunteering are reported in Table 4. Most base respondents indicated that they wanted to give back to society (82%). Sixty percent also stated that they wanted to share with those who were less fortunate. Interestingly, the community respondents clearly wanted to give back to their community. Possibly this is a result of their being grounded in the community.

Respondents were also asked what benefits they derive from volunteering. The three most common answers were: learning to understand different people (50%), learning to be helpful and kind (49%), and learning to solve community problems (46%). For each of the questions above, the community sample – though they could pick more than one answer – seemed to only choose one or two. Their view of reasons for volunteering and the benefits they derived were much narrower in focus than those in the Air Force respondents.

When base respondents were asked how important they felt volunteering is, 96% indicated that it is either very or somewhat important to them. All community respondents reported feeling volunteering was important, but this result is probably due to the self-selection of the sample.

Even though almost all military respondents indicated agreement with the importance of volunteering, many also felt that the main issue that keeps them from volunteering is personal schedule conflicts (87%) which interestingly was also the number one reason given by persons in the general population and by those in our community sample.

Table 4**Reasons for Volunteering and Derived Benefits**

	<i>Shreveport- Bossier Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>Military Base Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>2005 Current Population Survey Percent of Population</i>
<i>Volunteer Influence (check all that apply)</i>			
Give Back to Society	67%	82%	
Sharing with Less Fortunate	12%	60%	
Religious Conviction	0%	38%	
Meet New People	2%	38%	
Feeling of Being Needed	7%	34%	
Helping Others Helps You	12%	32%	
Desire to Learn New Skill	0%	24%	
Other	0%	14%	

Volunteer Benefits (check all that apply)

Learn to Understand Different People	20%	50%	
Learn to be Helpful and Kind	21%	49%	
Learn to Solve Community Problems	28%	46%	
Learn to Respect Others	13%	28%	
Other	12%	23%	
<i>How Important is Volunteering?</i>			
Very Important	70%	53%	
Somewhat Important	30%	43%	
Not Very Important	0%	3%	
Not Important at All	0%	1%	
<i>What Keeps You From Volunteering? (check all that apply)</i>			
Personal Schedule Conflicts	40%	87%	65%
Health Problems	14%	31%	11%
Personal Safety	15%	24%	
Liability Issues	14%	23%	
No Interest	15%	17%	9%
Time is too Valuable	2%	4%	3%
Age	1%	2%	6%
Other	4%	8%	66%

The Current Population Survey data is based on Table 4.

In addition to questions related to volunteering, respondents were also asked to report on their monetary contributions to nonprofit organizations as reported in Table 5. Ninety-six percent of the base personnel responding indicated that they or their household had given money to a nonprofit organization over the past year. Of those, 28% gave between \$100 and \$249 and 27% gave \$1000 or more. The top three reasons for giving included: helping the less fortunate (57%), giving back to the community (38%), and religious convictions (33%). In the community sample, about 4 out of 5 people also gave. Of those, most gave less than \$100 or more than \$1000, mirroring the military sample. According to *Giving and Volunteering in the United States 2001*, 89% of households gave an average annual contribution of \$1,620. In the base sample, a greater percentage of base respondents indicate giving money and 55% give at least \$250 annually.

Table 5**Monetary Contributions**

	<i>Shreveport- Bossier Sample Percent of Sample</i>	<i>Military Base Sample Percent of Sample</i>
<i>Giving Money to Nonprofits</i>		
Give	79%	96%
Do not give	13%	3%
Unsure/Don't know/No answer	0%	1%
<i>How Much Annually?</i>		
Under \$100	31%	17%
\$100-249	17%	28%
\$250-499	9%	15%
\$500-999	15%	13%
\$1000 or more	28%	27%
<i>Reasons for Contributing Money</i>		
Help the less fortunate	n/a	57%
Give back to the community	n/a	38%
Religious convictions	n/a	33%
Asked personally to give	n/a	7%
Other	n/a	5%

Cross tabulations for voluntarism of the base respondents were not significant at the .05 level of significance or less, and neither were cross tabulations for the importance of giving. These are reported in Tables 6 and 7.

Discussion

Base personnel receive support from their superiors for volunteer activity, they volunteer in large numbers both on the base and off the base. While the demographics of the community survey differed, several similarities were noted: when they started volunteering, the areas in which they volunteer, monetary contributions, contributions of time, and the overall importance of contributions. However, there are some distinct differences between these two groups. First, the Air Force sample was far more likely to volunteer because of work and to have support in

their workplace than those in the community sample. Secondly, the community sample was less likely to give money, was more likely to volunteer to give back to society and was singular in their reasons for and the derived benefits from volunteering.

Compared to the civilian population, a greater percentage of Air Force personnel volunteered than civilians in the United States population. Their areas of involvement are different. Religion and education are the two main areas of volunteer involvement for the base respondents and it is youth development and religion for the general population. The best explanation for these differences and others identified in the study between the base sample as representatives of the military, the community sample and the general population is the emergent theory on collectivistic-based volunteerism and the role of the Air Force ideology of “the whole person”. As Eckstein (2001) has pointed out and this study re-affirms, norms of a group, leadership, and the level of institutionalization of volunteering itself may be better indicators of volunteerism in groups.

The positive impact of networking on volunteerism for a transient population like base personnel was also noted in the literature review (Tolbert, Lyson, and Irwin, 1998). The greatest number of base personnel volunteering (44%) were asked to do so by someone at work and another 20% reported being asked by a friend. This means that two-thirds of base personnel were asked to volunteer through networking and certainly suggests the importance of networking. Wilson and Musick (1997) also discussed the importance of a “calling” for public sector employees such as the military. Although the survey lacked a question to test this, contact with military personnel, especially those from this base, indicate that most feel a fierce commitment to their role as defenders of our nation and this “calling” may well translate into the higher rates of volunteerism that we found among base personnel. It is certainly an aspect of military volunteering that should be explored in future research.

This study enhances our understanding of volunteerism by documenting the role of military personnel especially when compared to the residents of the community. In communities that are the home to a major military installation such as Barksdale Air Force Base, the military is often one of the largest employers but also one of the readiest sources of volunteers and contributions. Although a case study, this research is a start toward a much more comprehensive picture of military personnel and their impact on volunteerism in the United States. It is an area of inquiry worthy of continued study. The impact of various types of bases on volunteerism and the impact of the various branches of the military on volunteerism should be fully explored.

Communities sometimes develop to support bases. This study clearly indicates that the development around bases can also enhance and enrich the lives of non-military persons, civilians, living around bases. In part, this comes from military personnel having started a Big Brothers Big Sisters Program or Little League Program, which has touched the lives of countless civilians and enhanced the quality of life for persons living around the base. Perhaps much more important is the fact that 29% of the base sample reported volunteering off the base and 67% reported volunteering on the base and off the base. This means that of the 6,000 plus base personnel, almost all, approximately 5,760 plus personnel, are involved in the community as volunteers in some capacity.

The focus of nonprofit and government relations often focuses on areas such as advocacy, tax exemption, service contracts, and grants. This research indicates that the military, a division of the federal government, plays a vital role in supporting volunteerism, the heart of nonprofit organizations. They volunteer their time and talent. It also indicates that the military encourages its personnel to become involved in nonprofit organizations. The study also has documented the indirect role of the military in the establishment of new nonprofit organizations in communities, an area needing further research. The research documents the financial contributions made by

military personnel and how base personnel financially contribute and support nonprofits. Both direct and indirect relationships between the military as a government entity and nonprofit organizations were examined by this research and much remains to be explored.

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