Assessing the Association Between Airmen Participation in Force Support Squadron Programs and Unit Cohesion

An Evaluation of the UNITE Initiative

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ISSUE

The UNITE Initiative provides unit leadership with funding to participate in cohesion-promoting activities, often by using activities provided by the installation’s Force Support Squadron (FSS). The Air Force asked RAND to evaluate whether participation in UNITE events is associated with unit cohesion, which could ultimately impact airmen and unit readiness and resilience.

APPROACH

We developed a logic model for UNITE to guide the evaluation (Figure 1), which visually describes how a program operates to achieve an expected outcome. We conducted a process evaluation to understand program implementation and identify successes, limitations, and lessons learned. An outcome evaluation explored whether UNITE participation was associated with expected short-term and intermediate outcomes. Data sources included interviews and open-ended surveys with community cohesion coordinators (C3s), who actually implement UNITE; post-participation surveys completed by airmen; and event details submitted by unit commanders.

CONCLUSIONS

• C3s were seen as valuable resources for units, but they experienced some practical barriers to completing their jobs, such as changing policies, unwieldy data submission processes, and limited marketing materials. A lack of awareness on the part of commanders may also have hindered uptake of the initiative.

• Airmen and commanders who participated in UNITE were largely satisfied with UNITE. In their view, UNITE events provided an opportunity to relax and socialize among members of a unit.

• Certain types of events were more likely to be associated with expected short-term outcomes (roughly two weeks after participation). Specifically, UNITE events that were provided by the local FSS were rated as less of an opportunity to relax and decompress, engage with other airmen, and promote and reinforce peer, squadron, and Air Force values.
- UNITE events that airmen rated as an opportunity to decompress, interact with other airmen, and reinforce peer, squadron, and Air Force values were associated with higher ratings of overall unit cohesion two weeks after participation. However, the association between social interaction and overall cohesion faded over time and was no longer significant by six weeks after the event.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The Air Force could increase uptake of UNITE through centralized marketing tools and increased marketing resources for C3s. Materials could emphasize that UNITE is intended to enhance unit cohesion. In addition, clearer and more consistent guidance on UNITE policies and procedures would benefit C3s, commanders, and airmen.
- Data systems used to collect UNITE event data are not user friendly, limiting the data available for both programmatic and evaluation purposes. Data quality could be improved by designing interfaces for report submission that are more user friendly or using tools (such as Common Access Card readers) at events to track participation. Better data might also shed light on the negative association between FSS-provided activities and certain short-term outcomes.
- Sustaining cohesion-related improvements that are associated with UNITE events will likely require repeated events that provide airmen with the opportunity to unwind, interact with peers, and promote unit, squadron, and Air Force values.

**FIGURE 1. UNITE LOGIC MODEL**