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Alumni Altruism: Added Value from Retired Employees

Leon E. Pennington

Organizations desiring to add value can leverage support from former employees. A qualitative, triangulated study of 317 professors of military science of U.S. Army ROTC battalions found an elevated sense of altruism on the part of alumni. Results and analysis of the comprehensive study of more than 275 upper-level educational institutions constituted a contribution to social exchange theory and uncovered a potential asset for business and non-profit organizations. Elevated levels of altruism make corporate retirees a source of value for mentorship, networking, and recruiting of employees.

Recent research of U.S. Army Reserved Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)

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alumni development yielded insights of potential value to business and nonprofit leaders desiring to leverage the knowledge and experience of former employees. Professors of military science (PMSs) in college and university Army ROTC battalions were surveyed and interviewed to gain a better understanding of alumni development and social exchange theory and to extract best practices for alumni association development. The study revealed an elevated level of altruistic behavior by alumni that could facilitate development of business and nonprofit alumni associations across the business spectrum.

Most college graduates take six years or less to complete their college degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), yet these relatively few years result in a significant level of loyalty. According to a Council for Aid to Education (2009) report, alumni gifts to universities and colleges were valued at \$31.6 billion in 2008. Weerts and Ronca (2008), in their study of alumni volunteers, stated "alumni influence is critical

for institutions." Although for-profit corporations may not need the traditional fund-raising efforts of educational alumni associations, research has revealed several nonfinancial benefits alumni may provide for business and nonprofit organizations. If postcareer involvement opportunities like those associated with educational institutions existed for business and nonprofit organizations, one can imagine the potential for service for individuals with 3 to 5 times the years of involvement with corporate alma maters. Why would alumni volunteer to help their organizations? The answer may lie in the area of social exchange theory.

Literature Review

Volunteer service is an example of the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory. For example, alumni participation is typically "paid for," or reciprocated, by public recognition in alumni associations or by organizational leadership. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), social exchange theory includes

the interdependent relationships between individuals and groups and incorporates the principle of reciprocity as one of its tenets. Interdependent relationships have been identified in social exchange studies since the early 1960s when researchers described reciprocal behavior in the workplace (Gouldner, 1960); peer relationships have been identified since the 1980s (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Research has indicated some aspects of postcareer involvement are already in effect. According to Genheimer and Shehab (2009), alumni participation in business is considered normal and is expected. For example, they noted retired employees were found to contribute to organizations in meaningful ways as members of business or nonprofit advisory boards. Gonyea and Googins (2006) studied the impact of volunteerism on retiree quality of life and the benefits of volunteer service to the corporations. The researchers found retirees used their accumulated wisdom and experience to improve the images of corporations while benefiting themselves with renewed friendships and a sense of purpose and belonging. Research on worker training and alumni transfer and rehiring practices in the paper industry by Van Wijk and Holmes (2007) showed the value of alumni experience

to the management, production, and internal auditing departments of a major paper organization. Additionally, Chou, Jordan, and Kilpatrick (2004) suggested nonprofit organizations can learn lessons from educational institutions in building alumni associations and utilizing alumni in their organizations. Specific areas in which retirees could assist their corporate alma maters included mentoring, networking, and recruiting.

Mentoring

Corporations have found alumni support essential in terms of mentoring (Gloeckler, 2006). Ahlfeldt and Cramb (2007) studied the impact of the Visa Europe Corporation Leadership Development Program. They found the use of alumni as coaches for training new personnel added value to the training and was a determinant factor in program success. Using alumni as coaches for newcomers showed their capability as mentors in contemporary business environments.

Networking

Alumni have the experience and contacts needed to develop an effective corporate alumni association. According to Plice and Reinig (2008), corporations have found alumni support especially important in the area of networking. The researchers noted alumni advisory

support in building teamwork and communication skills, which are considered important qualities within the business community. Chiavacci (2005) found alumni networking for corporate hiring extant in Japan. In conducting qualitative research into the effect of alumni networks in Japanese hiring practices, the researcher found strong traditions of using alumni relationships.

Gloeckler (2006) found business schools were assisting alumni by providing networking benefits. The researcher described the business contacts universities provided to graduates via alumni support networks. One example of such networking was found at the Washington University Olin School in St. Louis, where students were allowed to conduct corporate database searches. Barnard and Rensleigh (2008) also noted alumni were able to connect with other alumni through online resources, which were cost effective and easy to use.

Recruiting

Fogg (2008) described outreach programs in which motivated alumni served as event hosts, recruiters, and pre-admission interviewers. Fogg (2008) noted development officials of educational institutions were well aware of the potential alumni provided to recruiting efforts. They

identified the key to beginning an alumni association was having the right people involved in the development process.

The researchers in the ROTC alumni research project found most alumni contributed far more value in terms of mentoring, program support, and recruiting than they received in benefits. In finding this reciprocal imbalance during the study, researchers contributed to social exchange theory and highlighted the potential benefit of alumni service to business and nonprofit organizations.

Methodology

The ROTC alumni research project was a qualitative exploratory study involving 317 university-level ROTC PMSs and their experience with alumni organizations. The study was conducted to achieve greater understanding of alumni development theory and to determine best practices and characteristics of effectiveness in building and sustaining alumni associations in U.S. Army ROTC battalions. Lessons learned from the study could enable business leaders to initiate alumni association development, increase effectiveness of alumni participation, and improve alumni relationships within their organizations.

Instruments

The qualitative study was based upon data obtained from guided interviews and a 20-question exploratory survey. Interview questions were open-ended and included 10 primary and 30 probative questions to ensure in-depth responses. The interview process enabled a thick study despite the relatively small size of the interview population, typical for a qualitative methods inquiry (Patton, 2002). There were 140 survey respondents, for a response rate of 44 percent, resulting in a 6.2 percent margin of error at a 95 percent confidence level.

Findings and conclusions from the data were analyzed against the backdrop of literature thematically categorized as support to institutions, benefit to supporters, and nonprofits and other organizations. Use of multiple data sources was incorporated in the research study as an analytical method designed to support the credibility of the findings, a technique referred to as triangulation (Patton, 2002). The PMS responses were grouped into patterns and themes to determine lessons learned by using a process Guba (as cited in Creswell, 2002) described as convergence and by using pattern development in the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants

The participants in the study were PMSs either currently serving in U.S. Army ROTC battalions throughout the United States or in-transition from such battalions. According to Cadet Command (2009) officials, the PMS population at the time of the study numbered 275 Army officers and 42 former PMSs, for a total of 317 Army officers. The PMS population provided a unique perspective on Army ROTC alumni association development because they were the commanders, resource decision makers, and primary officials responsible for alumni association development in their organizations. Effectively the chief executive officers of their organizations, the PMSs also coordinated with their respective institutional alumni associations. Other unique populations that could have provided perspectives for alumni association development existed, including Army ROTC alumni, university alumni directors, Army ROTC alumni association officers, Army ROTC battalion personnel other than PMSs, and cadets.

Educational Institutions

The focus of the study was alumni association development in a national organization with a distinct alumni population. U.S.

Army ROTC battalions were chosen because each battalion was affiliated with an independent alumni association under the direction of the PMS and because the battalions were located at a wide variety of upper-level educational institutions. The use of colleges and universities was significant from a business perspective because the majority of entry-level business employees are recent college graduates.

Educational institution categories included public schools, private schools, Ivy League schools, state schools, senior military colleges, military junior colleges, historically black

colleges and universities, and Hispanic associated colleges and universities (see Figure 1). Drawn from all 50 states, 275 educational institutions hosting ROTC battalions ranging in on-campus population sizes from fewer than 1,000 to more than 20,000 students were included in the study (see Figures 2 and 3).

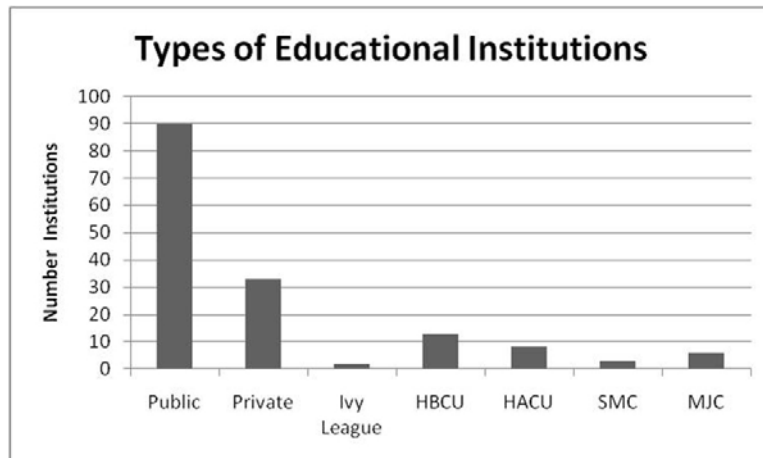
Results and Findings

Overall Derived Themes

Analysis of the data collected from the survey and interviews used for the research study resulted in 40 discernable patterns. The 40 patterns were analyzed,

compared, and grouped into eight themes (see Table 1). Triangulation of the data collection methods and pattern analyses was employed to enhance the validity of the process. Further analysis and grouping of the eight themes resulted in three overall derived themes from the research study (Patton, 2002): (a) importance and potential of alumni associations, (b) need for organization and support, and (c) mission and role of alumni. The overall derived themes were the dominant themes of the research study and were used to determine the findings.

Figure 1
Types of Educational Institutions for Survey Respondents*



*SMC = senior military colleges

MJC = military junior colleges

HBCU = historically black colleges and universities;

HACU = Hispanic associated colleges and universities

Figure 2
Location of Educational Institutions for Survey Respondents

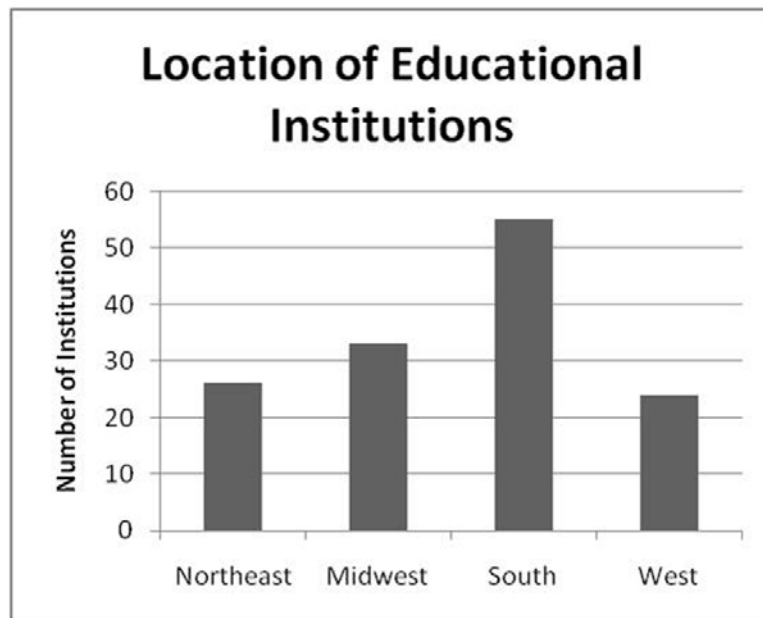


Figure 3
Size of Educational Institutions for Survey Respondents

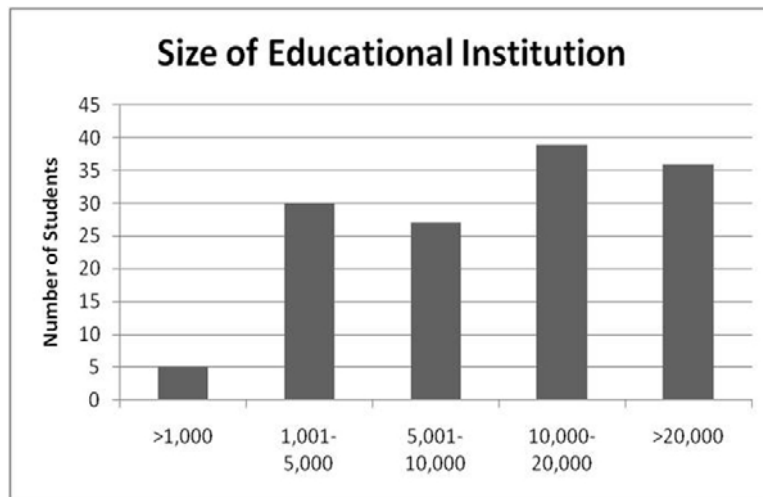


Table 1
Overall Derived Themes

Collection Method	Themes by Collection Method	Overall Derived Themes
Survey	Importance of alumni association	Importance and potential of alumni associations
Survey	Need for support	
Interview	Alumni as primacy	Need for organization and support
Interview	Need for organization	
Survey	Focus of alumni	
Survey	Need for organization	Mission and role of alumni
Interview	Importance of alumni association	
Interview	Potential benefits	

Findings

Overall derived theme: Importance and potential of alumni associations.

Finding 1: Professors of military science believe that U.S. Army ROTC alumni associations are important and add value to their programs.

Data and comments from the PMSs revealed the importance of alumni to U.S. Army ROTC battalions. When asked to evaluate the importance of a U.S. Army ROTC alumni association, 76 percent of the population selected the *Important* or *Very Important* response. Alumni provided mentorship and a sense of camaraderie, were invited as guest speakers at battalion functions, and served as ambassadors for the ROTC battalion to the educational institution and the local community. Alumni who supported ROTC battalions played an important role in

program enhancement and cadet leadership skill development and were considered a value-added asset of U.S. Army ROTC battalions.

Finding 2: Cadet Command officials believe that alumni of U.S. Army ROTC programs should be identified, contacted, and encouraged to become associated with an ROTC alumni association.

When asked about the effectiveness of various contact methods, 26 percent of the written comments specifically identified Cadet Command, the major Army command responsible for all U.S. Army ROTC activities, as a source for information. This particular question also generated the second-highest number of write-in responses in the *Other* category.

Overall derived theme: Need for organization and support. *Finding 3:* The

majority of U.S. Army ROTC alumni associations are understaffed, underfunded, and unorganized and have received little to no development guidance.

Professors of military science were neither required nor resourced to develop alumni associations for their battalions. According to the Cadet Command Web site, the mission of Cadet Command is to “commission the future officer leadership of the United States Army and motivate young people to be better citizens” (Cadet Command, 2010, p. 1). The fact that alumni development is not considered a priority because it is not a Cadet Command or ROTC battalion mission was reflected in the comments from PMSs during the interviews and on the survey.

Overall derived theme: Mission and role of alumni. *Finding 4:* Alumni of U.S. Army ROTC programs understand the potential importance of their contributions to the future leadership of the U.S. Army and have demonstrated elevated levels of altruistic behavior.

According to the survey and interview data, alumni who provided support to U.S. Army ROTC battalions did so for a mix of social benefits and altruistic reasons. Some alumni, especially the alumni association leadership, were found in influential and personally rewarding positions, affording them elevated levels of social recognition. For example, one of the most common uses of alumni was as guest speakers and mentors to cadets and newly commissioned lieutenants. U.S. Army ROTC alumni were regarded as important community members and were normally recognized publicly for their service.

Although alumni received recognition for their service, most were found to contribute far more value to the cadets as mentors and to the ROTC battalions in terms of recruiting and program support than they received in benefits. Data indicated the majority of alumni were motivated by altruism and the desire to help cadets and newly commissioned lieutenants do well in their new careers

as Army officers. This imbalance of service versus reward was a noteworthy reciprocal characteristic and provided a contribution to social exchange theory of potential interest to business and nonprofit organizations.

Conclusions and Implications

The research study revealed the potential of alumni to make a significant impact in the areas of mentoring, networking, and recruiting. Business and nonprofit organization leaders who desire to create value in their organizations should consider the experience and wisdom of altruistic-minded retirees. Considering the level of loyalty generated for the years of exposure to a college or university versus the years spent by employees in a business career leading to retirement, the potential for postcareer support for a business or nonprofit organization alma mater is noteworthy. Alumni associations contribute to the greater good in society and to members by providing forums for their service-related ideas and contributions. Although existing research indicated some corporations recognize the value of former employees, the ROTC alumni research project found active support is needed by organization leaders to develop viable alumni associations.

Further Research

The purpose of the research was to study U.S. Army ROTC battalions to determine how ROTC alumni associations were developed and what factors characterized their effectiveness. The research study finding of elevated levels of altruistic behavior in some members constituted a contribution to social exchange theory. Because typical corporate employees have 3 to 5 times the years of exposure to their organizations, further research of business and nonprofit alumni associations is recommended to develop the concepts addressed in this paper. Potential future research designs could include existing alumni populations, focus groups with retirees, surveys of current and former employees, and existing business and non-profit organization membership associations.

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