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

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An Evaluation of the UNITE Initiative



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## About This Report

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In 2016, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen David L. Goldfein released a letter describing squadrons as “the beating heart of the United States Air Force; our most essential team” and kicked off an effort to revitalize squadrons, promoting their readiness and resilience. As part of this effort, the Air Force Services Center established the UNITE Initiative, designed to provide squadron and unit commanders with opportunities to leverage Force Support Squadron (FSS) activities to increase unit cohesion. Improved unit cohesion is expected to improve readiness and resilience among unit members.

The Air Force asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to develop an evaluation that would assess the relationship between participation in FSS activities and unit and airman readiness and resilience. The UNITE Initiative provided the context for this evaluation. In this executive summary, we provide a brief overview of the construct of unit<sup>1</sup> (or group) cohesion, describe the UNITE Initiative, and develop a logic model and evaluation framework. The evaluation presented in this executive summary uses both qualitative and quantitative data from numerous sources to assess the implementation of UNITE and its outcomes. After presenting the results of the evaluation, we provide the Air Force with policy implications and recommendations designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the UNITE Initiative. We also outline areas for future exploration. The full report (Holliday et al., 2022) provides more details about the analysis and findings.

It is important to keep in mind that the UNITE Initiative described in this report was implemented prior to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the United States.

Familiarity with the 2019 RAND report *Air Force Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Programs and Services: Contribution to Airman and Family Resilience and Readiness* (Meadows et al., 2019) is recommended (but not required) background for the current study.

The research reported here was commissioned by Air Force Manpower, Personnel and Services, Directorate of Services (AF/A1S) and conducted within the Workforce, Development, and Health Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE as part of a fiscal year 2019 project “Correlation Between Participation in FSS Programs, Services, and Activities and Airman and Unit Readiness.”

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Air Force does not have an official definition of a *unit*, we use the term generically throughout the report to represent several types of groups of airmen, including groups, squadrons, flights, and elements.

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## Abbreviations

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AAR	after action report
AFSVC	Air Force Services Center
APF	appropriated funds
C3	Community Cohesion Coordinator
CONOPS	concept of operations
DoD ID	U.S. Department of Defense identification number
FSS	Force Support Squadron
MAJCOM	major command
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MWR	Morale, Welfare, and Recreation
NAF	nonappropriated funds
POC	point of contact

# Chapter 1. Introduction

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In 2016, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen David L. Goldfein released a letter describing squadrons as “the beating heart of the United States Air Force; our most essential team” (Goldfein, 2016). In this letter, he initiated an effort to revitalize squadrons (Barnett, 2018), with the ultimate goal of promoting the readiness and resilience of the force (Brissett, 2017). In light of the squadron revitalization effort, the Air Force Services Center (AFSVC) established the UNITE Initiative, which is designed to provide squadron and unit commanders with opportunities to leverage Force Support Squadron (FSS) activities to increase unit cohesion.<sup>2</sup> Improved unit cohesion is expected to improve readiness and resilience among unit members.

It is important to keep in mind that the UNITE Initiative described in this executive summary was implemented prior to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the United States.

## UNITE Initiative

Through UNITE, unit commanders have access to funding to support activities that are designed to promote unit cohesion. The UNITE Initiative was implemented in fall 2018 at an initial set of 41 installations, representing a diverse variety of geographic locations and major commands (MAJCOMs). UNITE was rolled out at the remaining installations in early 2019.

### *UNITE Initiative Staff and Training*

UNITE is overseen and executed by staff at AFSVC. This includes oversight by the AFSVC Community Programs Branch Chief and two Community Program and Unit Cohesion Lead Coordinators, who are located at AFSVC. To implement UNITE at the installation level, AFSVC hired Community Cohesion Coordinators (C3s) across participating installations. Per the UNITE Concept of Operations (CONOPS), C3s are responsible for planning programs, activities, and events that directly support unit cohesion, leveraging Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) programming along with resources and activities in the local community. C3s participate in an in-residence, week-long centralized training program provided by AFSVC. During the training, C3s learn more about the scope of their role, gain hands-on practice by planning a sample UNITE event, receive training on the financial aspects of UNITE, and interact with other C3s.

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<sup>2</sup> Unit cohesion can be considered a category of group cohesion that is specific to the military. Group cohesion represents the “tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213, as cited in Carron and Brawley, 2000). Group cohesion includes multiple dimensions: task cohesion, social cohesion, and group pride.

C3s are expected to develop a set of standardized event options that can be offered to units, but they can also work more closely with units to develop a tailored experience that meets a unit's specific needs.

C3s work directly with units to plan events. Units assign a point of contact (POC), who serves as the liaison between the unit commander and/or leadership and the C3. The POC is responsible for working with the C3 to develop an event idea that addresses the needs of their unit (more detail about the C3 and POC roles is presented in Chapter 2). C3s conduct outreach to commanders and POCs to explain the initiative and to encourage units to take advantage of the funding.

### *UNITE Events and Funding*

UNITE is designed to serve active-duty, reserve, and civilian airmen. Per the UNITE Phasing CONOPS, the implementation of UNITE took place in phases according to the availability of funding, beginning with active-duty service members and moving to Air Force Reserve Component service members. UNITE events must be designed with a cohesion or team-building component. As noted, C3s work with unit POCs to develop an event proposal, which is then submitted to AFSVC. If the cohesion or team-building component of the event is not clear, AFSVC requires the event to more clearly include these elements. AFSVC staff ultimately must approve each event. During the first year of implementation, events were submitted for approval to AFSVC via a UNITE SharePoint website. The event request form required information about the details of the event, reasons for participation (e.g., to increase morale, camaraderie, or esprit de corps; work on a team-building exercise; or develop a new skill or competency), estimated number of participants, and estimated funding required, including appropriated funds (APF) and nonappropriated funds (NAF). After the event, C3s are responsible for submitting an after action report (AAR), which includes information collected from POCs and commanders about actual attendance, funding used, and whether the event was successful.

Through UNITE, squadrons have access to two types of funding for events. APF, provided via Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), are available to offset participation costs (the amounts varied during initial implementation),<sup>3</sup> whereas NAF are provided to cover food and beverages for UNITE events (\$5 per participant). AFSVC provides C3s with suggested events that could be implemented. For example, units could make use of MWR facilities, such as outdoor recreation, golf courses, or bowling centers; participate in outdoor adventures, such as rock climbing or ropes courses; or participate in team challenges, such as combat bowling or pool obstacle courses. However, UNITE events do not necessarily require funding: For example, a UNITE

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<sup>3</sup> The amount of APF funding per participant changed over the course of the study. Installations participating in the first wave of implementation had access to \$17.50/participant for events. After the initiative expanded, an additional subset of installations was able to access \$13.00/participant from August to December 2019. The official second phase of UNITE began in January 2020, during which the number of installations receiving funding expanded and the amount decreased to \$13.50/participant across installations. Note that NAF funding has remained unchanged.

event could bring together unit members to participate in a volunteer activity in the local community. The goal is for each unit to participate in at least one UNITE event per year. Commanders have discretion with respect to the size of the unit that participates in a given event; during the first year of implementation, the event supported large, higher-level units (e.g., through a squadron fun day or picnic) but also supported smaller units (e.g., elements or workstations). Note that, throughout the report, when we refer to a *unit*, we use the term broadly to indicate any of these levels of organization.

### *UNITE Logic Model*

A logic model visually summarizes a program's operations and outcomes (Acosta et al., 2013; Milstein, Wetterhall, and CDC Evaluation Working Group, 2000). It includes a program's *resources* or inputs (such as staff, funding, and guidance documents that govern a program); *activities* that are carried out as part of the program; *outputs*, which are the immediate results of program activities (such as participation in program activities); *short-term outcomes* (expected immediately following participation); *intermediate outcomes* (expected in the several weeks to months following participation in an event); and long-term *impacts* (longer-term effects of the program observed at the group or community level). A logic model demonstrates the hypothesized relationship between program resources and inputs, activities, and expected results or outcomes. In other words, a logic model is a visual depiction of how a program is supposed to work in order to achieve a desired outcome. The logic model for UNITE is presented in Figure 1.1.

The first three columns of the logic model describe the operation of the program. The resources required to implement UNITE are relevant staff, including staff located at AFSVC and installation-level C3s; unit commanders and POCs; training materials and resource guides, which are described in more detail in Chapter 2; the UNITE CONOPS; funding; and an event tracking system.

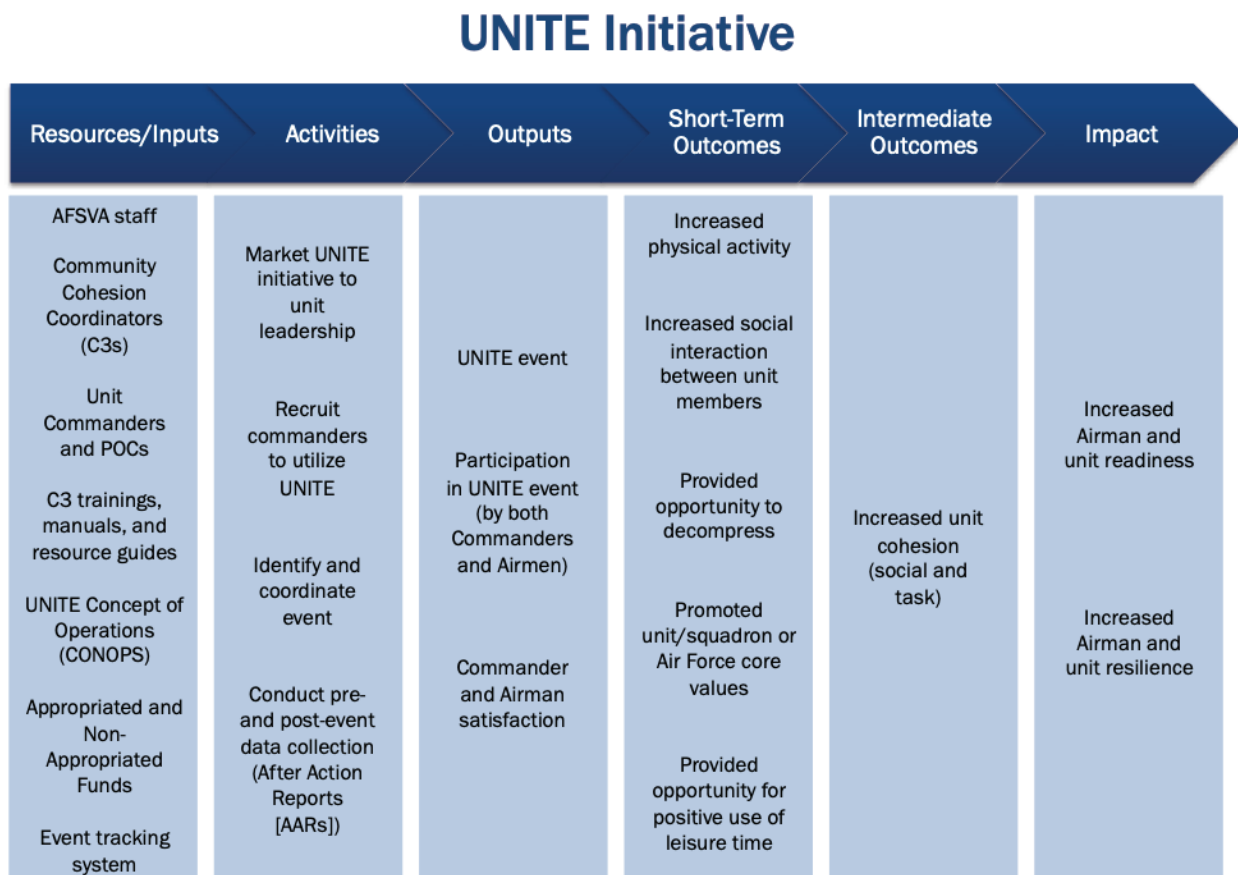
C3s have a key role in the UNITE Initiative activities, which include marketing the initiative to unit leadership and recruiting units to participate, working with units to develop and execute a UNITE event, and submitting information about the event through the AARs. The outputs are participation in UNITE by commanders and unit members, as well as satisfaction with the UNITE event.

The second three columns summarize the short-term outcomes expected from the program. Because UNITE events provide units with an opportunity to engage in activities focused on cohesion and team-building, the expected short-term outcomes include increased physical activity (when the event has a physical component, such as a sports tournament), increased social interaction between unit members, an opportunity to decompress, and promotion of squadron and Air Force values. UNITE events may take place during duty hours or off-duty hours; those that take place during off-duty hours are also expected to contribute to positive use of leisure time. These short-term outcomes highlight some of the predictors of group cohesion identified through

a literature review (e.g., social interaction, group culture and dynamics, shared experience). They also link to several readiness and resilience building blocks (e.g., social capital, peer and squadron values, and involvement in activities), as described in Table 1.1.<sup>4</sup>

By contributing to these short-term outcomes, UNITE is expected to increase unit cohesion in the intermediate term. The ultimate intended impact of the program is to increase the readiness and resilience of individual airmen and units.

**Figure 1.1. UNITE Logic Model**



NOTE: AFSVA = Air Force Services Agency.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the literature review and readiness and resilience building blocks, see the full report (Holliday et al., 2022).

**Table 1.1. Link Between UNITE Short-Term Outcomes and Readiness and Resilience Building Blocks**

<b>Intended Short-Term Outcomes</b>	<b>Readiness and Resilience Building Block(s)</b>	<b>Conceptual Link Between Short-Term Outcomes and Building Block(s)</b>
Increased social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social network</li> </ul>	This building block refers to the availability of social connections to an individual. It is expected that increased social interaction within the unit helps build the strength of the connections among unit members.
Positive use of leisure time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping strategies and skills</li> <li>• Involvement in activities</li> </ul>	The coping strategies and skills building block refers to practices that help an individual adapt to stress. Our previous work (Meadows et al., 2019) highlighted ways in which leisure can be used as a type of coping strategy, in part by acting as a buffer to stress (see Caldwell, 2005; and Iwasaki et al., 2002). The involvement in activities building block refers to participation in leisure, community, and social activities (e.g., Sanderson and Brewer, 2017; Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012), which can support mental and behavioral health.
Opportunity to decompress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping strategies and skills</li> </ul>	This building block refers to practices that help an individual adapt to stress. The leisure coping literature has indicated that opportunities to relax and rejuvenate can serve as a coping strategy (Iwasaki, MacTavish, and MacKay, 2005).
Promotion of Air Force institutional values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer group/unit values</li> <li>• Community/Air Force values</li> </ul>	The peer group/unit values building block refers to group beliefs and attitudes tied to a social identity shared within the group (McFadden, Campbell, and Taylor, 2015; Morgan, Fletcher, and Sarkar, 2017). The community/Air Force values building block refers to shared community beliefs and commitments (e.g., Hopkins-Chadwick, 2006; and McGonigle et al., 2005). Both building blocks are directly relevant to the promotion of Air Force values.
Increased physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical health</li> <li>• Involvement in activities</li> </ul>	The physical health building block refers to physical well-being, including physical activity and nutrition (Holland and Schmidt, 2015; Yousafzai, Rasheed, and Bhutta, 2013). Whether a UNITE event includes a component of physical activity is directly relevant to this building block. In addition, the involvement in activities building block refers to participation in informal or formal activities, including recreational activities (e.g., Chen and Kovacs, 2013; and Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012). In the building blocks model, involvement in activities is conceptualized as a building block that can contribute to the physical health building block, such as with group physical activities, which are common in UNITE events.

In addition to summarizing the operation of the program, the logic model is the basis for our evaluation of UNITE, which includes both process (i.e., resources and inputs, activities, outputs)

and outcome (i.e., short-term and intermediate outcomes) components. The goal of the process evaluation was to understand how the program was implemented and to identify successes, limitations, and lessons learned, whereas the outcome evaluation examined whether UNITE participation was achieving its intended outcomes. Our evaluation focused on the first year of implementation of the initiative; therefore, we do not extend the evaluation into longer-term assessment of impacts (i.e., airman and unit readiness and resilience). Table 1.2 provides an overview of our analysis, noting the source of the data, type of data, and methods used in each analysis. It also denotes the perspective gained by each data source (e.g., airmen, unit commanders, C3s).

**Table 1.2. Overview of Data Sources and Methods**

	Data Source(s)	Perspective	Data Type and Method
Process/implementation evaluation			
Resources and inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C3 interviews</li> <li>• C3 email survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C3s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative (structural and saturation coding)</li> </ul>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AARs</li> <li>• C3 interviews</li> <li>• C3 email survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unit commanders</li> <li>• C3s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative (structural and saturation coding)</li> <li>• Qualitative (saturation coding)</li> </ul>
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AARs</li> <li>• UNITE post-participation survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unit commanders</li> <li>• Airmen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative (saturation coding)</li> <li>• Descriptive statistics</li> </ul>
Outcome evaluation <sup>a</sup>			
Short-term outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNITE post-participation survey</li> <li>• C3 SharePoint database</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Airmen</li> <li>• C3s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multivariate regression</li> </ul>
Intermediate outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNITE post-participation survey</li> <li>• C3 SharePoint database</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Airmen</li> <li>• C3s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Path model</li> </ul>

NOTE: Structural coding is a process in which codes are based on study objectives and interview questions and are intended to identify themes in the data. Saturation coding is a process in which development of new codes stops once no new information or themes are observed in the data. More details on methods can be found in Appendixes B, C, and D in the main report.

<sup>a</sup> The outcome evaluation also uses Air Force personnel data.

## Chapter 2. Process: How Is UNITE Implemented?

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In this chapter, we summarize the results of our process evaluation, which examined how UNITE is being implemented. This process evaluation provides information the Air Force can use to improve the efficiency (and, ultimately, the effectiveness) of UNITE. As outlined in the UNITE logic model (see Chapter 1), a process or implementation evaluation focuses on resources and inputs (e.g., funding, C3s), activities (e.g., planning and coordinating UNITE events), and outputs (e.g., satisfaction).

We largely relied on qualitative data for the process evaluation, which came from various sources and groups of people, as follows:

- First, we conducted in-depth telephone interviews with 22 C3s who were selected to represent a variety of installations with respect to MAJCOM, installation size, remote or isolated status, and geography.
- Second, all C3s were invited to participate in a brief email survey. Invitations were sent roughly three to six months after the in-depth interviews were completed (February to March 2020). At the time, there were 73 C3s; of those, we received responses from 40, for an overall response rate of 55 percent.
- Third, commanders and POCs from units participating in UNITE events completed AARs to provide information about their experiences. We used data from a random sample of the roughly 2,400 events for which we had AARs.
- Fourth, UNITE participants were given the opportunity to provide their thoughts in an open-ended survey item on the post-participation survey. We received 595 comments regarding UNITE events that occurred between July 27, 2019, and November 7, 2019.
- Fifth, we collected quantitative survey data assessing UNITE participants' satisfaction with the event they attended. Specifically, one survey item asked airmen to rate the following sentence on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): "I was satisfied with the activity my unit participated in."

The C3 interviews, C3 surveys, and quantitative survey data were designed as primary data collection methods for the purposes of the evaluation. Although the AAR data and open-ended survey data were not formally collected as part of the evaluation, we reviewed and analyzed these secondary sources of data because they represented additional perspectives on UNITE implementation (i.e., commanders, POCs, and participants).

### Summary of Results

Following the logic model presented in Chapter 1, we can compare what we heard from various sources—C3s, units, and UNITE participants—to the resources and inputs, activities, and outputs that UNITE is expected to use and generate. Shortcomings in these areas may lead to recommendations that can improve both the efficiency and the effectiveness of UNITE. Table

2.1 summarizes the key takeaways from the C3 interview, C3 email survey, AAR, and open-ended participant survey data. We can map these findings onto the process elements of the UNITE logic model.

### *Resources and Inputs*

The logic model identifies six key resources and inputs used by UNITE:

- C3s
- unit commanders and POCs
- C3 training, manuals, and guides
- UNITE CONOPS
- funding
- an event tracking system.

In terms of personnel, C3s were largely viewed as helpful by unit leadership and UNITE participants. However, we heard from some C3s who are overburdened, sometimes being tasked by installation leadership with duties outside of UNITE. Commanders and unit POCs play an important role in the UNITE planning process and in providing data needed for evaluation, though it was not always clear who was providing that data and how involved unit leadership is. Turnover of unit leadership is also a potential concern, and C3s noted that socialization among UNITE participants must occur continuously.

C3s were largely complimentary of the training they received, though we heard some complaints about a lack of subsequent interaction with other C3s after training, despite the existence of networking tools (e.g., Blackboard). The one area where we heard consistent criticism was the inconsistent and ever-changing guidance provided by AFSVC and, in particular, what was and was not covered by UNITE funding. Although many participants were grateful for the funding, all of the various types of informants noted that increasing the amount that could be used on food could increase both participation and satisfaction.

As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, the current event tracking system may be in need of an update now that the initiative has been in place for some time. Understanding what data are needed by various stakeholders (e.g., financial data, event data, outcome data), together with feedback from current system users, could inform these changes.

### *Activities*

Four activities are part of the UNITE logic model: marketing of UNITE to unit leadership, recruiting commanders to use the initiative, identifying and coordinating events, and conducting pre- and post-event data collection in AARs. One consistent theme that we heard, across data types and informants, was that not enough is done to market UNITE as an option for commanders to use. Some C3s said they used their personal funds to create marketing materials, and others noted a lack of consistent marketing materials to use across the Air Force. As we discuss later, the awareness of UNITE may play a role in how many units use it. Messaging

about the purpose of UNITE also was viewed as lacking by some C3s, commanders, POCs, and participants. Some of this messaging may need to address the notion that UNITE activities are just another form of “mandatory fun.”

C3s spoke to how units identify events, telling us that they use a variety of methods to work with units in developing and planning activities. Although a one-size-fits-all approach may not be appropriate, the variability in the planning process could explain why UNITE is more (or less) successful at one installation versus another. One of the biggest complaints about the planning process was the lead time required to get a proposed UNITE event approved. This complaint led some C3s and unit commanders and POCs to suggest that perhaps not all events, such as those that are done frequently (e.g., bowling on the installation), need AFSVC approval. Many units would like more freedom over how UNITE funds are used.

Finally, data collection procedures are one area in which reality does not match the ideal. We heard frustrations with online collaboration tools and with the tools used to collect data about UNITE activities, both before and after they occur (e.g., AARs). C3s and units also complained about the collection of U.S. Department of Defense identification numbers (DoD IDs) used to identify airmen who should receive the post-participation surveys. Together, these issues have real implications for program evaluation and, specifically, outcome evaluation.

### *Outputs*

There are two outputs in the logic model: participation in UNITE (by both commanders and airmen) and satisfaction. As noted in the previous section, marketing is one area in which the reality of implementing UNITE may not match the ideal. A lack of awareness about the initiative could affect uptake on the part of commanders. Another consistent theme that is related to participation was frustration with a lack of attendance at UNITE events. Nonetheless, satisfaction with the initiative was reflected across data sources. Thus, although UNITE was clearly not perfect in the eyes of all C3s, commanders, and airmen, the majority viewed it positively. Approximately two weeks after participation in a UNITE activity, airmen received an invitation to take a short, two-minute survey.<sup>5</sup> One item on the survey asked airmen to rate the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): “I was satisfied with the activity my unit participated in.” The average score among survey respondents was 4.53 (standard deviation of 0.83), suggesting that airmen were satisfied overall with the UNITE event they attended.

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<sup>5</sup> For a complete description of the survey, see Appendix C in the full report (Holliday et al., 2022).

**Table 2.1. Key Takeaways from Qualitative Data**

Resources and Inputs	Activities	Outputs
<p>C3s:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>C3s might have additional duties outside of UNITE but no additional staff to help. (C3E)</li> </ul>	<p>Marketing of UNITE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a need for increased awareness of UNITE, and standardized marketing tools would be beneficial. (C3I)</li> <li>Part of marketing is making sure that airmen understand why UNITE exists. (AAR)</li> <li>Lack of awareness of UNITE may limit uptake. (C3E)</li> </ul>	<p>Participation in UNITE (by both commanders and airmen):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low attendance can be a problem, but deconflicting schedules and hosting events outside the work environment and off the installation may help. (AAR)</li> <li>Low participation was a concern, and participants offered off-site, duty-day activities as a way to increase it. (PS)</li> <li>Funding for food at events was seen by some participants as too low and may have implications for attendance. (PS)</li> </ul>
<p>Unit commanders and POCs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engaging with units, especially as commanders and POCs change, is an ongoing process. (C3E)</li> </ul>	<p>Recruiting commanders to use the initiative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>C3s vary in their approach to communicating with commanders and POCs and planning events. (C3I)</li> </ul>	<p>Satisfaction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Units reported that UNITE activities were a time to socialize and interact with other unit members, build unit morale and cohesion, and engage in team-building. (AAR)</li> <li>Overall, satisfaction was rated high. (PS)</li> <li>Participants said UNITE activities led to opportunities for team-building, socialization and interaction with other unit members, and relaxation. (PS)</li> <li>Some airmen still see UNITE activities as “forced” or “mandatory” fun and do not understand UNITE’s purpose. (PS)</li> </ul>
<p>C3 training, manuals, and guides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial C3 training provides a solid foundation for the role, though refresher training would be valuable. (C3I)</li> <li>A lack of standardized materials and guidance leads to variation across installations (e.g., with respect to the planning process, preference for on versus off base). (C3I)</li> <li>C3s report inconsistent and unclear policy and guidance from AFSVC. (C3E)</li> </ul>	<p>Identifying and coordinating events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Features of the installation and local community shape the specific offerings. (C3I)</li> <li>There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating UNITE activities across units. (C3E)</li> <li>The approval process for activities is cumbersome and not timely; last-minute requests by units cause frustration and may affect the quality of events. (C3E)</li> <li>Units were frustrated with the amount of lead time required to hold an event, but those who started the planning process early reported a better experience. (AAR)</li> </ul>	

Resources and Inputs	Activities	Outputs
<p>UNITE CONOPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of formalized guidance (e.g., an Air Force Instruction) is a barrier. (C3I)</li> </ul> <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amount and timing of funding can create logistical challenges (e.g., APF and NAF are on different calendars). (C3I)</li> <li>The budget for food is viewed by some C3s as too low. (C3E)</li> <li>Lack of flexibility in the use of UNITE funds is viewed by units as a limiting factor. (AAR)</li> <li>Frustration with funding limitations led some participants to suggest that units should have more control over and flexibility in determining what activities can be done with UNITE funds. (PS)</li> </ul> <p>Event tracking system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data collection about events (e.g., AAR data from units, obtaining DoD IDs) is problematic in several ways, including ease of use problems, lack of information technology support, and nonresponsiveness on the part of data providers. (C3E)</li> </ul>	<p>Conducting pre- and post-event data collection in AARs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submission of AAR data is difficult because of the unwieldy data system and challenges getting the information from POCs. (C3I)</li> </ul>	

NOTE: C3I = C3 interviews; C3E = C3 email survey; AAR = after action report data from unit commanders and POCs; PS = participant survey.

## Chapter 3. Outcome: What Does UNITE Do?

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To better understand the association between participation in UNITE and unit cohesion, we used an evidence-informed framework to develop two survey instruments for airmen, administered approximately two weeks following participation in a UNITE event and again six weeks later (i.e., approximately eight weeks after the event). Specifically, our approach to designing a post-participation survey for the UNITE Initiative began with identifying which of a set of building blocks of readiness and resilience were most likely to be addressed in UNITE events.<sup>6</sup> Table 3.1 outlines the selected building blocks, how they link to the short-term outcomes in the UNITE logic model, and how they were measured in the first post-event survey.

**Table 3.1. Building Blocks, Outcomes, and Survey Items**

<b>Readiness and Resilience Building Block(s)</b>	<b>Short-Term Outcomes</b>	<b>Airmen Post-Participation Survey Item</b>
Social network	Increased social interaction	Participating in this activity provided me with additional opportunities to interact or connect with members of my unit. (Survey 1) Members of my unit are interacting and connecting more because of this activity. (Survey 2)
Coping strategies and skills; involvement in activities	Positive use of leisure time	Participating in this activity was an enjoyable use of my free time.
Coping strategies and skills	Opportunity to decompress	This activity provided me with an opportunity to unwind (i.e., rest, relax, and/or have some fun).
Peer group and unit values; community and Air Force Values	Promotion of Air Force institutional values	Participating in this activity with unit members promoted or reinforced Air Force core values.
Physical activity; involvement in activities	Increased physical activity	Participating in this activity was physically demanding.

In addition, we were interested in whether the distinct characteristics of the UNITE event matter for the building blocks and for cohesion. The C3 SharePoint database provided information on UNITE event characteristics. Specifically, these files provided insight into whether the event was located on or off base, leveraged MOA funds, and was provided by the

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<sup>6</sup> The building blocks model was developed in prior RAND work. For details on the development and the model, see Meadows et al., 2019.

installation FSS.<sup>7</sup> The first post-event survey asked airmen whether their UNITE event occurred during duty hours.

Our primary outcome of interest was overall unit cohesion. We used the group integration subscales from the Group Environment Questionnaire (Widmeyer, Brawley, and Carron, 1985), modified in ways similar to other studies of cohesion (Chang and Bordia, 2001; Gupta, Huang, and Niranjana, 2010) and with wording adapted to the Air Force context.

## Analytic Approach

We employed the statistical technique of path analysis to answer our three research questions (shown in Table 3.2). Path analysis, a type of multiple regression analysis, models the direct and indirect associations that exist among a set of variables. In our case, the path model quantifies the associations among UNITE event characteristics, building blocks, and cohesion. We present a simplified version of our analytic model in Figure 3.1, in which each arrow represents an association that is estimated in our analysis. For example, arrow (or path) A allows event characteristics to be directly associated with cohesion as measured on the second post-event survey, arrow B allows event characteristics to be directly associated with building blocks, and arrow C allows event characteristics to be directly associated with cohesion as measured on the first post-event survey. Such paths are called *direct associations*.

Path analysis also allows for the estimation of indirect associations, or how one variable is associated with another *through* one or more other variables. In our example, event characteristics can be indirectly associated with cohesion as measured on the second post-event survey through the building blocks (paths B and D) or through cohesion at the first post-event survey (paths C and F). Finally, the total associations are an estimate of the overall association, taking all possible paths (both direct and indirect) into account. For example, the total association between building blocks and cohesion from the second post-event survey would be a combination of paths D, E, and F. The difference between this model and our full analytic model is that Figure 3.1 shows only one path between the event characteristics and the building blocks and only one path from the building blocks to cohesion. In our analytic model, each event characteristic has its own arrow connecting to each building block and both cohesion measures. Each building block also has its own set of arrows connecting to cohesion from the first survey to cohesion from the second survey.

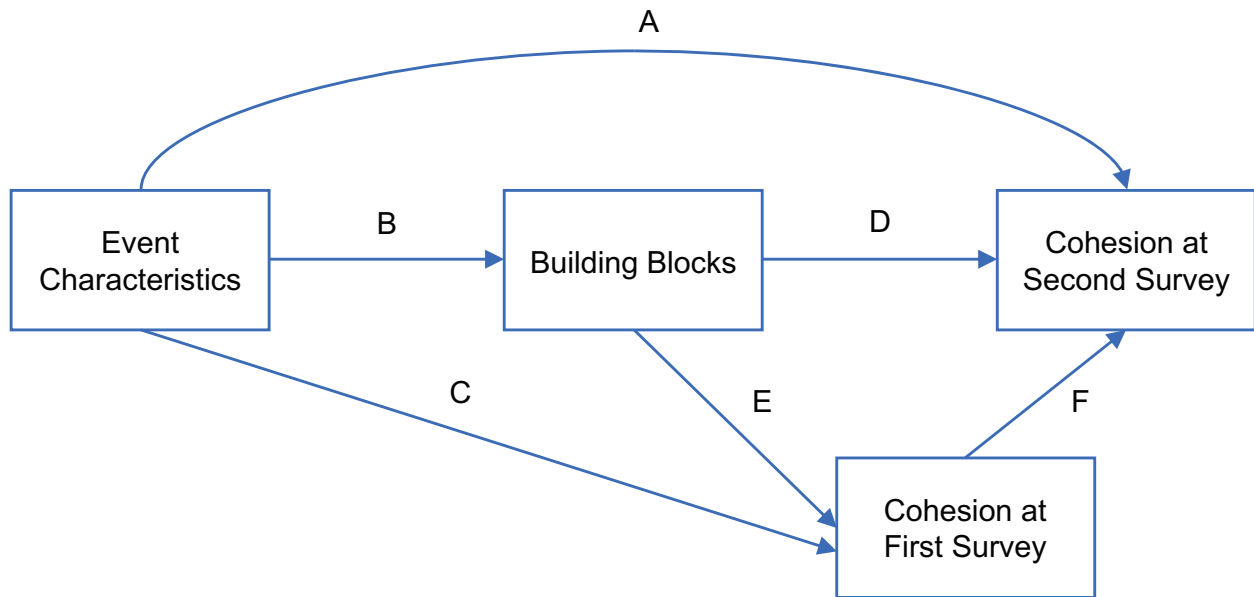
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<sup>7</sup> MOA funds refer to APF that was provided via MOA for the implementation of UNITE.

**Table 3.2. Research Questions and Corresponding Paths in Path Analysis**

Research Question	Corresponding Paths from Figure 3.1
1. How are event characteristics associated with the readiness and resilience building blocks?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Path B</li> </ul>
2. How are readiness and resilience building blocks directly and indirectly associated with overall unit, social, and task cohesion at both the first and second post-event surveys?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First survey: path E</li> <li>• Second survey: path D</li> <li>• Total: paths D, E, and F</li> </ul>
3. How are event characteristics associated with overall unit, social, and task cohesion (both directly and indirectly) through the readiness and resilience building blocks?	Cohesion first survey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct: path C</li> <li>• Indirect: paths B and E</li> <li>• Total: paths B, C, and E</li> </ul> Cohesion second survey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct: path A</li> <li>• Indirect: paths B, C, D, E, and F</li> <li>• Total: All paths</li> </ul>

**Figure 3.1. Simplified Path Analysis Model**



Although the model in Figure 3.1 is a simplified version of our complete analytic model, we use it to provide a basic overview of how we leverage the various paths to answer each of the three research questions. Table 3.2 provides each of the research questions and the corresponding paths from the simplified model in Figure 3.1.

For simplicity, we only show paths with associations that were statistically significant. Full results on all cohesion outcomes (i.e., task and social cohesion) and results that include the full sample of airmen who responded to the first post-event survey can be found in Appendix D of the full report (Holliday et al., 2022). All estimates are presented in effect sizes. An *effect size* is

a measure of the size of the association that a variable (e.g., a building block) has on a desired outcome (e.g., cohesion), expressed as the fraction of a standard deviation of the outcome. A *standard deviation* is a measure of how much the outcome varies, or how spread out the outcome data are from the average. Thus, a larger effect size, or larger fraction of that standard deviation, implies a stronger association. Although a disadvantage of effect sizes is that they are difficult to interpret on their own, the advantage is that they allow us to compare results across studies, which often use different measures, on a common scale.

### *Limitations*

Selection bias is a possibility because the surveys were voluntary. We guard against this potential bias by controlling for key individual, military, and installation characteristics in our models that may influence participation in both UNITE and the survey. Although these controls account for pertinent factors that may influence estimated associations between building blocks or event characteristics and cohesion, they are not comprehensive. Similarly, there may be unaccounted-for unit, installation, or UNITE event characteristics that would influence airmen perceptions of cohesion. Another key limitation is that not all airmen who participated in an event during the time frame of interest received a survey invitation (e.g., not all airmen who participated provided their DoD ID numbers), and not all events that occurred during the analysis period were covered by participant survey data.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, we cannot say that the building blocks or event characteristics *caused* increases or decreases in cohesion; rather, our results reflect associations between variables.

## Results

We ran one analytic model and used aspects of that model to answer each of the three research questions. Notably, when building the model, we removed event characteristics that were never significantly associated with building blocks or cohesion from our model for parsimony. These excluded variables include whether the UNITE event occurred during duty hours, whether it was held off base (event characteristics), and whether the event involved physical activity (building block). Positive use of leisure time (building block) was also excluded from the final model because it was only asked of airmen who participated in UNITE events held outside of duty hours, which resulted in a small number of cases ( $n = 92$ ). All models also control for gender, age, rank, being assigned to a remote or isolated installation, and installation size (according to the number of active-duty airmen).

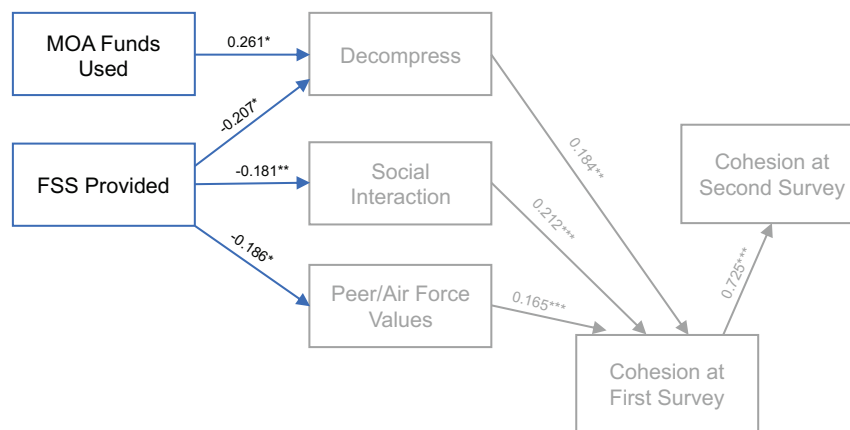
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<sup>8</sup> According to the AAR data, 2,452 events occurred during the time frame of our analysis. According to the participant survey data, 545 events are included in the first post-event survey, and 338 events are covered by both the first and second surveys.

## How Are Event Characteristics Directly Associated with the Readiness and Resilience Building Blocks?

Research question 1 asks how event characteristics are associated with the readiness and resilience building blocks. Figure 3.2 presents the results of our analytic model, highlighting the paths that are relevant to this research question. The estimate of 0.261 ( $p < 0.05$ ) indicates that airmen rated events that used MOA funds higher on decompression compared with those that did not use MOA funds, controlling for all other variables in the model. Using MOA funds was not significantly associated with the social interaction or peer/Air Force values building blocks. The indicator for whether the event was FSS-provided was negatively associated with more building blocks. Events that were FSS-provided were rated *lower* on the decompression, social interaction, and peer/Air Force values building blocks by 0.207, 0.181, and 0.186 standard deviations, respectively ( $p < 0.05$ ), compared with events that were not FSS-provided.

**Figure 3.2. Path Analysis Results Related to Research Question 1**

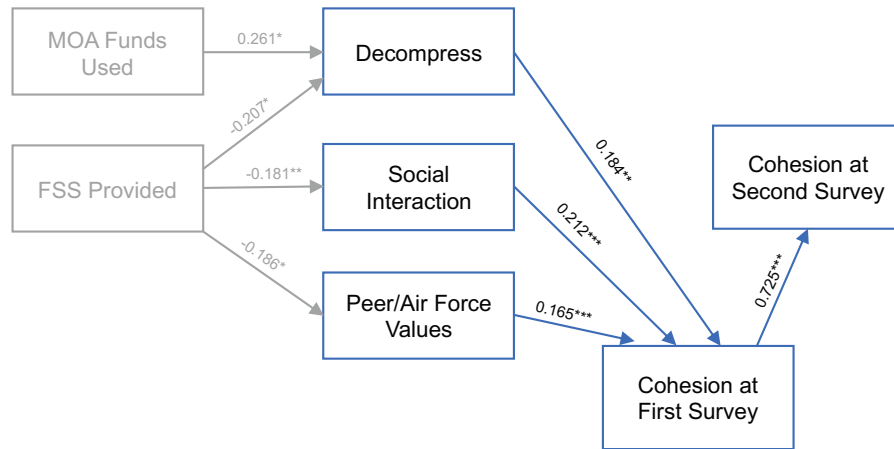


NOTE:  $N = 624$ . Only paths with significant associations are highlighted. The full model allows for all possible paths between event characteristics, building blocks, and cohesion outcomes, as well as paths between building blocks and cohesion from the second post-event survey. Standard errors (not shown) are clustered at the installation level. Models control for gender, age, rank, remote or isolated installation, and installation size. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

## How Are Readiness and Resilience Building Blocks Directly and Indirectly Associated with Overall Unit, Social, and Task Cohesion at Both the First and Second Post-Event Surveys?

Research question 2 asks how the readiness and resilience building blocks are directly and indirectly associated with overall unit cohesion at both the first and second post-event surveys. Figure 3.3 illustrates the path analysis results pertinent to this research question.

**Figure 3.3. Path Analysis Results Related to Research Question 2**



NOTE:  $N = 624$ . Only paths with significant associations are highlighted. The full model allows for all possible paths between event characteristics, building blocks, and cohesion outcomes, as well as paths between building blocks and cohesion from the second post-event survey. Standard errors (not shown) are clustered at the installation level. Models control for gender, age, rank, remote or isolated installation, and installation size. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

The direct associations between the building blocks and cohesion from the first post-event survey indicate that airman-rated decompression, social interaction, and peer/Air Force values were positively associated with cohesion, measured two weeks after UNITE participation. The largest association was with social interaction, such that a one standard deviation increase in social interaction was associated with a 0.212 standard deviation increase in cohesion at that time ( $p < 0.001$ ). The second-largest association was with decompression, such that a one standard deviation increase in the decompression building block was associated with a 0.184 standard deviation increase in cohesion at that time ( $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, the lowest association was with peer/Air Force values, such that a one standard deviation increase in the values building block was associated with a 0.165 standard deviation increase in cohesion at that time ( $p < 0.001$ ). We found no significant direct associations between the building blocks and cohesion rated by airmen at the second post-event survey.

To understand the total associations between the building blocks and cohesion from the second post-event survey, we must calculate the combined association of both the direct and indirect (i.e., building blocks via cohesion from the first post-event survey) pathways. Table 3.3 shows the total associations for the building blocks and cohesion at the second post-event survey. The total associations for the decompression and peer/Air Force values building blocks with cohesion from the second post-event survey are very similar to the associations with cohesion from the first post-event survey. For example, a one standard deviation increase in the decompression building block is associated with a 0.185 standard deviation increase in cohesion at the second time point ( $p < 0.001$ ). However, the total association between the social interaction building block and cohesion from the second time point is about one-third as large as

the association with cohesion at the first post-event survey and is no longer significant. Thus, although the associations between the decompression and peer/Air Force values building blocks to cohesion persisted at the second survey, the association between social interaction and cohesion faded.

**Table 3.3. Total Associations of Building Blocks with Cohesion at Second Post-Event Surveys**

<b>Building Block</b>	<b>Cohesion at Second Post-Event Survey</b>
Decompression	0.185*** (0.053)
Social interaction	0.071 (0.062)
Peer/Air Force values	0.148** (0.051)

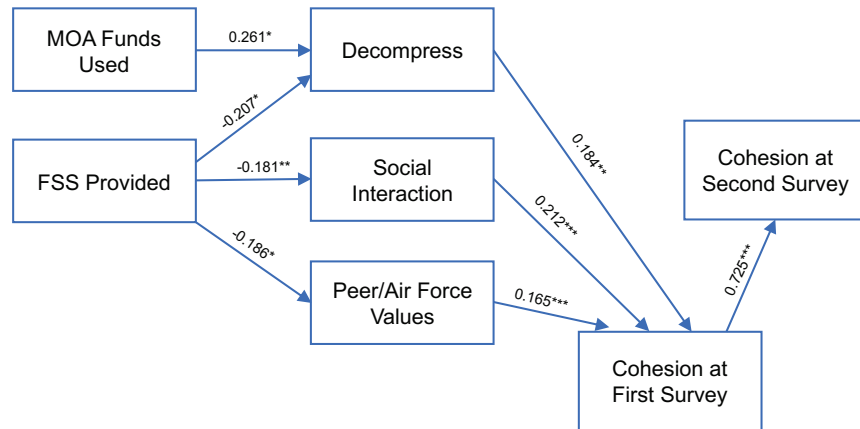
SOURCE: RAND analysis of airmen survey data.

NOTE:  $N = 624$ . Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the installation level. Models control for gender, age, rank, remote or isolated installation, and installation size. \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

#### How Are Event Characteristics Associated with Overall Unit, Social, and Task Cohesion Both Directly and Indirectly Through the Readiness and Resilience Building Blocks?

Our last research question asks how event characteristics are associated with overall unit cohesion both directly and indirectly through the readiness and resilience building blocks. Figure 3.4 illustrates that all pathways are pertinent to this research question. No arrows directly connect any event characteristic with cohesion from either the first or second post-event survey, indicating that the event characteristics are not directly related to cohesion at either time point.

**Figure 3.4. Path Analysis Results Related to Research Question 3**



NOTE:  $N = 624$ . Only paths with significant associations are highlighted. The full model allows for all possible paths between event characteristics, building blocks, and cohesion outcomes, as well as paths between building blocks and cohesion from the second post-event survey. Standard errors (not shown) are clustered at the installation level. Models control for gender, age, rank, remote or isolated installation, and installation size. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

Estimating indirect and total associations requires calculating the combination of the pathways in Figure 3.4, and we present those results in Table 3.4. In regard to MOA-funded events, there were no significant indirect or total associations with cohesion at either time point. In regard to FSS-provided events, there was a significant, negative, indirect association (among all building blocks) of  $-0.107$  standard deviation ( $p < 0.01$ ) with cohesion at the first post-event survey, but that association fades to insignificance at the second post-event survey. When taking into account all possible paths, there are no significant total associations between FSS-provided events and cohesion at either time point.

**Table 3.4. Indirect and Total Associations Between Event Characteristics and Cohesion from First and Second Post-Event Surveys**

Event Characteristics	Cohesion at First Post-Event Survey		Cohesion at Second Post-Event Survey	
	Indirect Association	Total Association	Indirect Association	Total Association
Used MOA funds	0.084 (0.045)	0.027 (0.113)	0.025 (0.082)	0.115 (0.099)
FSS-provided	$-0.107^{**}$ (0.035)	$-0.051$ (0.076)	$-0.038$ (0.056)	$-0.048$ (0.086)

SOURCE: RAND analysis of airmen survey data.

NOTE:  $N = 624$ . Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the installation level. Models control for gender, age, rank, remote or isolated installation, and installation size. \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ .

## Summary of Results: Short-Term and Intermediate Outcomes

In this chapter, we focused on the short-term and intermediate outcomes that UNITE aims to achieve, as summarized in the logic model presented in Chapter 1. Using a path analysis, we found that two event characteristics were associated with how airmen viewed UNITE events. Specifically, events offered by the installation FSS were viewed as less of an opportunity to unwind and decompress, socially interact with peers, and promote peer, squadron, and Air Force values. FSS-funded activities were also negatively, though indirectly, associated with cohesion two weeks after the UNITE event. Conversely, MOA-funded events were positively associated with decompression.

UNITE events that airmen rated as providing an opportunity to decompress, connect with their fellow airmen, and promote institutional values were positively associated with overall unit cohesion immediately after participation (i.e., roughly two weeks). Although the association between decompression and peer/Air Force institutional values and cohesion remained eight weeks post-participation, the association with social interaction faded and became insignificant for overall unit cohesion. Longer-term associations between decompression and peer/Air Force values at the second post-event survey were driven by the strong, positive association between cohesion at the two time points.

## Chapter 4. Policy Implications

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Before reviewing the policy implications of the implementation and outcome evaluations, a few words of caution are warranted. Because UNITE was a new initiative when we began our study, it was constantly evolving as our evaluation took place. Implementation, and rules and regulations about implementation, also matured as the initiative was rolled out. Therefore, the results of our implementation analysis may have been influenced by the changing nature of UNITE. Our outcome evaluation should be seen as a proof of concept, primarily because we could not control where and when UNITE was rolled out across the Air Force. Therefore, we were not able to conduct a randomized control trial. Randomized control trials are the gold standard in program evaluation because the fact that they are randomized allows researchers to say that a program or intervention caused an observed result. We could not randomly assign airmen (or installations) to use UNITE, nor were we able to compare participants and nonparticipants, because the Air Force's goal was to get all units to use the funding and hold events. Instead, we conducted a post-participation-only analysis, collecting data from UNITE participants after they attended a UNITE event. Thus, we are unable to claim that our analysis is a reflection of a causal relationship between UNITE and measured outcomes.

### Policy Implications for the Implementation of UNITE

These recommendations are especially relevant to AFSVC because it supports installation-level FSSs.

**Increase awareness of UNITE among unit commanders.** Commanders and airmen noted that they were not aware of UNITE until they heard of other units having events. C3s noted that one of their biggest obstacles to successfully implementing UNITE was a lack of awareness on the part of units. First and foremost, AFSVC should consider providing each C3 with a marketing budget that, like other UNITE funding, could be based on the number of airmen at a given installation or the number of eligible units. In addition, creating marketing templates or marketing packages for C3s to adapt to their installations would make marketing more consistent across the Air Force.

**Improve UNITE messaging through use of standardized materials.** We heard from C3s and airmen that the purpose of UNITE is not always obvious. Unit commanders should be clear that UNITE events are designed to enhance unit cohesion, often through team-building. Boosting morale and providing an opportunity to relax or rejuvenate are added benefits, but these shorter-term outcomes should be seen as a pathway to achieving increased cohesion, which is the primary purpose of UNITE. When UNITE activities are combined with other programs (e.g., suicide prevention stand-downs or resilience days), the purpose of UNITE can be obscured.

**Develop other materials and processes that may increase uptake of UNITE.** Developing other materials in addition to the marketing materials could help C3s make UNITE easier for unit commanders to use. First, develop a set of tools to structure the C3 and unit commander or POC interactions. These tools could include introductory email templates, flyers, and training binders for C3s to use with POCs. Some C3s have already developed such tools, and they could serve as drafts for others to adapt. Second, develop a set of ready-to-execute UNITE activity options that could be preapproved and used by units on short notice. These would be events that have been approved in the past and are already known to meet UNITE guidelines. Having such a list of on-demand activities could make it easier for units that are limited in the amount of time they can be away from their workspace or that have unpredictable schedules to use UNITE.

**Provide C3s with the tools and resources they need to be effective in their jobs.**

According to our interviews with C3s, we learned that some of them are using personal funds to cover expenses incurred when fulfilling their duties, including when paying for marketing materials, cell phones, and transportation. Although it may not be feasible to provide every C3 with a vehicle, they could be reimbursed for mileage when travel is required (e.g., to pick up supplies for a UNITE event or to scout out new venues). Providing them with a dedicated work cell phone could be feasible, however, and would allow C3s to use such phones for UNITE purposes only (e.g., as an emergency number in case something goes awry during an event). We also heard that some C3s are “borrowed” by installation leadership to cover other activities or programs. If possible, C3s should have protected time devoted only to UNITE duties. Finally, AFSVC should consider whether having additional staff in place (including a second C3) at larger installations could alleviate some of the time constraints that C3s at such installations are currently facing (e.g., not being able to check on UNITE events in person). Some larger installations have explored options for providing C3s with support, though this was only beginning to be implemented at the end of our evaluation period.

**Improve data collection tools, making them more user-friendly and more consistent.**

Reviews of existing data collection and collaboration tools were mixed, with some C3s having real difficulty and others being ambivalent about their experience. As users of the data collected by some of these tools, we believe that improvement is needed. The event tracking system, which we have referred to in this executive summary as the C3 SharePoint database, should be more user-friendly, with clear guidance on the type of data that should be inputted into each field. AAR forms should also be user-friendly, with consistent guidance on exactly what information should be captured. Consistency in the data captured by the event database and AARs is the only way to ensure that these data can be used for a high-quality evaluation of UNITE. C3s should also easily be able to track events and access information about past and future activities, if needed. Finally, the event request process should be simplified and streamlined.

**Hold annual, in-person refresher training for C3s.** Although C3s were generally pleased with the initial in-person training they received in San Antonio, Texas, several mentioned that

annual refresher training would be helpful. This training would serve two purposes. First, it would allow C3s to learn about any new procedures or processes put into place by AFSVC and allow for real-time feedback if C3s have concerns or questions. Second, it would allow for face-to-face interaction with other C3s and provide an opportunity to share effective practices for planning events with one another. Annual refresher training would not take the place of existing collaboration tools (e.g., Facebook, Blackboard) but would supplement it.

**Provide clearer and more-consistent guidance on UNITE policies, processes, and procedures.** C3s perceived the guidance they received from AFSVC to be unclear and inconsistent, which may reflect that UNITE was evolving during the period in which we conducted our evaluation. Nonetheless, AFSVC needs to provide clear and consistent guidance about the policies, processes, and procedures surrounding UNITE. This includes such topics as the nature of the different sources of funding, how they can and cannot be used, and specific elements that must be provided in a request form for an event to be approved. We are only aware of one guidance document: the UNITE CONOPS. Thus, it is worth considering a more formal guidance document, such as an Air Force Instruction that would codify policies, processes, and procedures that appear to C3s to be piecemeal. Finally (as noted earlier), any changes to UNITE guidance should be clearly communicated to relevant stakeholders, especially C3s, through multiple mechanisms, including existing networking tools (e.g., Facebook, Blackboard) and in-person refresher training.

**Consider where UNITE should be structurally located within the Air Force to best position it to achieve its broader goal of improving airman and unit readiness and resilience.** Currently, there is no requirement for UNITE events to use FSS programs or services. Therefore, it may be useful to consider whether UNITE should reside in AFSVC. AFSVC's mission statement does not include language about cohesion, readiness, or resilience.<sup>9</sup> The Air Force has several options for locating UNITE, should it decide to move it. It could be aligned with the personnel management function of the Air Staff (AF/A1). AF/A1 has both a Directorate of Services (AF/A1S) and an Integrated Resilience Directorate (AF/A1Z). Placing UNITE in AF/A1Z would reinforce the fact that, ultimately, UNITE is about improving airman and unit readiness and resilience. One C3 pointedly noted that UNITE's placement within the FSS flight limited their ability to implement the initiative because it was harder for them to reach wing commanders. Being at the wing level, where the Resiliency Program resides, was seen as a source of authority.

## Policy Implications for the Effectiveness of UNITE

These recommendations are directly relevant to installation FSSs, C3s, and commanders who are planning UNITE events.

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<sup>9</sup> See U.S. Air Force, 2002.

**Repeat UNITE events throughout the year.** Results from the path models show that events where airmen could relax and unwind, socially interact with peers, and reinforce peer, squadron, and Air Force values were positively associated with overall unit cohesion immediately after participation (i.e., roughly two weeks after). Just eight weeks after participation, the association with social interaction had faded to insignificance, and the other associations were reduced in magnitude. Further, most of the associations between the building blocks and overall unit cohesion at the second survey were driven by a very strong association between overall unit cohesion at the first and second surveys. The diminishing effects of UNITE are probably not surprising and suggest that certain types of events—those that allow for decompression, fellowship, and celebration of what it means to be an airman—should be repeated. Our results do not suggest how often such events should occur, though this is an empirical question that could be answered with a different UNITE implementation and research evaluation plan (see the following section on next steps). Further, it may not be financially viable for units to hold more than one UNITE event per funding cycle. Emphasizing volunteer events (e.g., building a Habitat for Humanity house, manning a food bank or kitchen) could provide one way to stretch UNITE dollars further and allow for multiple events throughout the year.

**Emphasize the importance of events with a particular focus.** Earlier, we noted the importance of events that targeted specific types of activities: opportunities to decompress, interact with fellow airmen, and reinforce and promote shared beliefs. Understanding this can help serve as a blueprint of sorts for future events. This may mean that events that are double-billed as UNITE and a resilience day or a suicide stand-down day may not be as effective as events that target only decompression, social interaction, or reinforcing shared values. This recommendation is also consistent with an earlier recommendation to make sure the goal of UNITE events is more explicit: They are not just fun barbeques, the event is about building cohesion through shared downtime, socializing, team-building, and reinforcing the Air Force way of life together.

**Take advantage of opportunities to hold UNITE events outside the gates of the installation.** One particularly intriguing finding from our path models was the negative association between activities provided by the installation FSS and the building blocks. We know that the overwhelming majority of FSS-supported events were held on base (92 percent). Moreover, qualitative data from participants support the notion that off-base events were preferred. Together, these data suggest that airmen were more receptive to events that took them away from day-to-day life on the installation. Curiously, however, we found no significant associations between off-base events and any of the building blocks or overall unit cohesion at either time point. Thus, although the FSS variable in the model may be absorbing some of the association between event location and the building blocks and cohesion (given the high correlation between the two), the location of the event alone is unlikely to fully explain the association we observed. We attempted to do a more in-depth analysis of the event description data from AARs by examining spending levels and descriptions of activities that were part of

UNITE events. Unfortunately, because of the inconsistent nature and poor quality of these data, our exploration did not yield useful insights into why FSS-sponsored events were negatively associated with the building blocks.

## Next Steps

The implementation and outcome evaluations of UNITE presented in this executive summary are only a first step toward assessing whether UNITE is achieving its goals of improving unit cohesion and airmen and unit readiness and resilience. Should the Air Force decide to continue the initiative, there are several steps it could take to further its evaluation efforts.

**Design and implement a more rigorous evaluation plan.** The optimal research design for an evaluation of UNITE would compare cohesion among airmen who did and did not participate in a UNITE event. Alternatively, a before-and-after participation approach would be a close second in terms of methodological rigor. Unfortunately, neither approach was an option, given the constraints of this study. Moving forward, however, both approaches are possible with enough planning time.

**Improve the quality of data collected for future evaluation efforts.** Once a more rigorous evaluation plan is developed, it will require high-quality data. Much of the data we relied on for our analysis was inserted by hand into less-than-user-friendly databases and software. Any time data are transferred from a subject to a holding place—such as a database—by a third party, the odds of errors in data translation increase. C3s told us that units had to collect UNITE participants' DoD IDs and input them into existing data systems by hand. DoD IDs are ten-digit numbers that can easily be transposed. Providing C3s with handheld Common Access Card readers that units can use to track participation would eliminate many of the data quality issues that UNITE faces. Similarly, participation data need to be directly linked to UNITE events using unique event numbers that cannot be reused. Finally, participation data is not the only type of data that should be of high quality. It is also very important to collect standardized data about UNITE events themselves. Such data might include the location of the event, partnerships with specific vendors, the time of day, the reason for the event, and more-detailed information about funding. The existing event database might need to be scrubbed and revised, and explicit instructions for how to complete it might need to be provided to C3s, units commanders, and POCs. Having such standardized, detailed event information would help to untangle the reason we observed a negative association between FSS-sponsored activities, building blocks, and cohesion. An additional benefit associated with improved data collection capabilities and the higher-quality data they will produce is that evaluation-related questions can become more nuanced. For example, what is the ideal size of a UNITE event? A squadron event may be too large, but is a workstation too small? What impact does inviting family members have? Are there certain types of activities (e.g., competitions) that are more strongly associated with some building blocks and ratings of unit cohesion?

**Assess the impact of UNITE on airmen and unit readiness and resilience.** At the inception of this study, we explored ways to measure readiness and resilience at the individual and unit levels, including by drawing on administrative data from a variety of sources. This proved more difficult and more resource-intensive than expected and could not be included in our first-stage evaluation of UNITE. However, in the future, the Air Force may wish to pursue risk and resilience profiles of airmen that could be aggregated at the unit level. For example, these profiles could include negative health behaviors, disciplinary actions, family issues, and financial problems. They could be collected from existing administrative and survey data (assuming they could be linked to individual airmen). The data would never be reported at the individual level, however, allowing airmen's personal information to remain confidential. Such profiles could provide an overall picture of how well a given unit is functioning and how prepared they may be for an upcoming deployment, training, or other stressful event.

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In 2016, the Air Force began an effort to revitalize squadrons, aimed at promoting the readiness and resilience of the force. In light of this effort, the Air Force Services Center established the UNITE Initiative and hired Community Cohesion Coordinators (C3s) across participating installations to plan programs, activities, and events that directly support unit cohesion, leveraging Force Support Squadron activities along with resources and activities in the local community.

Previous research suggests that providing units with opportunities to participate in group activities could serve to improve cohesion. However, the Air Force lacks data that demonstrate a correlation between the use of these activities and expected outcomes. In this report, the authors examine this connection by conducting an initial evaluation of the UNITE Initiative. The authors accomplish this evaluation by conducting interviews with C3s and reviewing post-event feedback from C3s, units, and airmen participants to understand how the program was implemented and identify successes, limitations, and lessons learned. The authors also use two post-event surveys, completed by airmen roughly two and six weeks after participating in a UNITE event, to examine whether participation was associated with perceptions of unit cohesion.

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