

“WE ALL CAN LEAD BECAUSE WE ALL CAN SERVE”: A NARRATIVE AND
VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE BIG EVENT AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Student Affairs professionals at American colleges and universities actively work to link students with meaningful extracurricular opportunities involving citizenship, leadership, and service ideals. Increasingly, institutions of higher education are providing extracurricular educational opportunities for students to respond and contribute to current community needs and concerns. Because of a decline in national civic engagement with American college students, universities have been called to take action and reverse this trend. Undoubtedly, The Big Event at Texas A&M University has created vast opportunities for Aggie students to understand and appreciate the role of community/university partnerships since its creation in 1982.

This dissertation evaluates The Big Event as a service and leadership organization. Through narrative and the use of storytelling, this study uncovers how Texas A&M communicates the perceived importance of service and leadership and then translates this message with a day of service for the Bryan/College Station community. During this project, The Big Event student executives were interviewed regarding their leadership experiences. Research question one asked how the student leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M. Coding and analysis of interview data revealed the emergence of four dominant themes. These themes include personal leadership development, individual leadership philosophy, service-mindedness, and the role of Texas A&M traditions.

Research question two asked what is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion. Coding and analysis revealed the emergence of themes related to these three areas. Regarding logistics, the theme reported was the importance of best recruitment practices. Questions regarding preparation revealed the importance of valuable, skill-based experiences and the need for improved internal relations among student executives, committees, and volunteers. Responses relating to perpetuation included the need for articulating the vision for future expansion and strategic campus planning for national and international growth of The Big Event.

In the research, the importance of civic learning was connected to current understandings and research regarding the motivations of students who choose to serve. The findings suggested important theoretical and practical implications. Specifically, narrative theory was employed through qualitative research methods to cultivate understanding and recommendations for future best practices. The application of student development theory ultimately remains a critical component of training students to be engaged citizens who co-create a better tomorrow through unity and collaboration. By investigating The Big Event, a contribution is made to current and future scholarship regarding civic engagement and service-learning in American higher education.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Keep serving until you've changed the world. But, at the end of it all, you'll find you may have changed yourself even more. The Big Event isn't Big because of our numbers. It is Big because it is an idea. An idea that one, you learn to do The Big Event every day of your life. That, in reality, the small events in life may just become The Big Ones, or those Big Days when all you can say is, 'One Big Thanks' to the community/family so close to you. It's an idea that, to serve is to lead, to sacrifice is to succeed, and to give is to gain. 'He is no fool who gives up what you cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.' Who you are today is who you are becoming. Your thoughts will determine your actions, and your actions will determine your character and your character your destiny. History cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has borne, nor the office he has held, but only for the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart. I hope your eyes have seen through The Big Event what many wait so long to begin; how to be a servant-leader. We all can lead because we all can serve. Soon, every day will be an adventure, and a 'Big Event.' 'You make a living by what you get, you make a life by what you give.' That now, the small ways to serve have been humbly altered into big ways to impact lives. That, to have true influence you must serve, you must sacrifice, and you must rise to the charge. The way you serve today will shake the foundations of the Earth and reverberate into the realms of eternity. 'The horse is made ready for the day of the battle, but the victory lies with the Lord.' So daily let us do The Big Event. Until next time, when we change the world again.

-The Big Event Charge, 2014

Student Affairs professionals at American colleges and universities actively work to link students with meaningful extracurricular opportunities involving citizenship,

leadership, and service ideals. Increasingly, these opportunities focus on allowing students to respond and contribute to current community needs and concerns. Barbara Jacoby, in her book, *Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, argued that civic engagement involves one or more of the following: learning from others, self, and environment to develop informed perspectives on social issues; valuing diversity and building bridges across differences; behaving and working through controversy with civility; taking an active role in the political process; participating actively in public life, public problem solving, and community service; assuming leadership and membership roles in organizations; developing empathy, ethics, values, and sense of social responsibility; and promoting social justice locally and globally (Jacoby, 2009). These student development processes guide students to desirable high-impact learning outcomes. High-impact practices, as defined by Kuh (2008), are effortful, help students build substantive relationships, promote engagement across differences, provide students with rich feedback, allow for trial and error application, and prompt reflection.

Civic engagement in higher education in the United States can be traced back many decades. In the past, preparing civic leaders had been part of many mission statements; however, the rhetoric of these mission statements did not match the efforts toward civic engagement on campuses throughout the United States. Colleges and universities were falling short of their missions by not facilitating enough creative civic learning and service opportunities for students due to the uncertainties of issues regarding costs and benefits. In more recent history, the link between civic engagement

and curriculum was joined by the incorporation of service-learning. Before then, it had been hard for campus faculty and staff to promote the ideals of civic engagement without academic incentives or ways to incorporate service-learning in the curriculum (Jacoby, 1996). This transition has received significant academic traction since the mid 1990s due to its pragmatic approach to solving authentic community needs. As student service has become more of an expectation, universities have been tasked with linking service-learning with meaningful learning outcomes.

Service-learning is becoming increasingly popular in American higher education. Advocates argue that it has a number of benefits for students and for society as a whole. This rhetoric has been so effective that many universities now recommend or mandate it for all students. However, traditional service-learning has involved substantial, sustained interaction between students and clients and close supervision by faculty and Student Affairs professionals. This kind of learning requires a strong commitment of resources, financial and other, thus making expansion of the program to large numbers of students very difficult. These limits are especially pressing in large, research-oriented universities. One means of managing this conundrum is to develop large, short-term events and programs such as The Big Event at Texas A&M University. However, there is little research about the extent to which this form of service-learning meets institutional objectives or provides the advantages that have been attributed to this type of experiential education. This dissertation is designed to fill this need.

Communication scholars have addressed the declining engagement of the American society and have suggested best practices to reverse this trend (Garner &

Barnes, 2013; Murphy, 2004; Trethewey, 2002). By applying practical theories with real world implications, Communication theory has and will continue to be a key solution for future progress (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). American universities are creating civic engagement and service-learning opportunities that seek to reinforce campus values while promoting citizenship, activism, and ethical leadership. Communication scholars have often investigated our field's role in the cultivation of responsible, productive citizens. Several studies cite the importance of strong teaching pedagogy that emphasizes the tenets and core competencies of the field (Kahl, 2010; Britt, 2012). The Communication field is poised to be part of the solution for future progress by suggesting best practices for civic engagement (Ahlfeldt, 2009; Allen, 2002; Frey, 2009; Garner & Barnes, 2013). Moreover, contemporary scholars have suggested the use of service-learning to practically apply Communication theory in a way that improves the world in which we live.

In this dissertation, I investigate The Big Event at Texas A&M as a philanthropic leadership organization. Specifically, I explore how the University constructs service and “giving back” as important and necessary to Aggie students who are Big Event leaders. As an organizational communication scholar, I utilize narrative to understand The Big Event’s continuing discourse from the past to the present and into the future.

Next, I discuss the philosophical, historical, and social bases of service-learning as foundational to the justification of my study of The Big Event.

Philosophical Basis of Service-Learning

The principles of civic engagement date back to Aristotle. He argued that

citizenship is a practice and a habit that must be learned (Aristotle, 1941). Personal motivation and involvement were the two specific pillars of his model of citizenship. As the very first advocate of participatory citizenship, Aristotle argued that citizens must have an investment in the government. Because of this, citizens are positioned to deliberate and make decisions about what influences their personal lives. I use his model of citizenship to underpin my dissertation work and provide historical grounding to the role of a college student as a citizen.

Aristotle's model of participatory democracy motivates all citizens to share in the deliberative well-being of the government. Simply defined, participatory democracy aims to create opportunities for members of a political group to contribute to decision-making within the group (Aristotle, 1941). Deliberation sparks action, and this is the intended goal of his ideal. According to Aristotle, citizens need to cultivate the habit of citizenship in order to contribute to society and take action when necessary. In *The Politics*, he defined a citizen as “a person who has the right to participate in deliberative or judicial office” (Aristotle, 1941, p. 455). The Athenian system allowed for citizens to be directly involved in governing. Furthermore, he defined the city-state as a “multitude of such citizens which is adequate for a self-sufficient life” (Aristotle, 1941, p. 20).

Deeply indebted to the Aristotelian model and his visions of an active citizenry, Arendt argued that words and actions are essential to citizenship (Arendt, 1958). The tensions between the public and the private spheres and the responsibilities of citizens concerning engagement are central to the work of Arendt. She believed the human condition of plurality to be the foundation on which the public realm is constructed. A

public life, for Arendt, is necessary for what she called the *vita activa*, “the proper place for human excellence” (Arendt, 1958, p. 34). The public realm is opposed to the private sphere and Arendt suggested that “a man who lived only a private life, was not fully human” (Arendt, 1958, p. 38). Arendt’s theories on the importance of words and actions while participating in the public sphere supported a model based on civic engagement, where students act in the public space of the university and their community and use words and actions to motivate others to act and to work together for causes that impact those involved. Arendt’s focus on the *vita activa* as the only place for excellence remained an influential model of active citizenship. This ideal citizen is what universities encourage their students to become by answering a call to action and engaging in various opportunities for civic activity. This moment is essential to what Charland (1987) defined as constitutive rhetoric. According to Charland, an effective rhetor gives members of the “constitutive audience” a reason to identify and engage through shared beliefs and action.

The ideal of the Greek *agora*, the public space for citizens to come together and discuss matters important to all, has remained influential. Through time, other scholars have elaborated on the ideal of the public sphere. Habermas’ work enhanced the “bigger picture” of a college student and the role s/he plays in the world, outside of the smaller confines of the role as a student on campus. Habermas formulated a model for open discussion through using “public reason” as a catalyst to serve as a check on state power. He believed that European culture was dominated by a “representational” environment, where parties sought to control their followers by overwhelming the country’s subjects

through extreme measures. According to Habermas, a variety of reasons resulted in the eventual disintegration of the public sphere. These reasons included the growth of a commercial mass media and the welfare state. The commercial mass media turned the critical public into a passive consumer public, and the welfare state merged the state with society, and thus the public sphere was eliminated. The public sphere became corrupted by self-interests and was no longer a place for the development of public-minded individuals (Habermas, 1989).

The influences of earlier thinkers have shaped modern-day initiatives and practices regarding civic engagement. Currently, civic engagement involves a wide range of activities, including the development of civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good. Civic engagement also encompasses the notions of global citizenship and interdependence. Through civic engagement, “individuals—as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world—are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world” (Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership, 2005, p. 9).

Inherent challenges exist with defining civic engagement in higher education. The term can relate to both individuals and institutions, yet for the purpose of this dissertation, the accepted definition relates to educating students to be participatory citizens. The definition of civic engagement is constantly expanding and being redefined by scholars, and its implications have changed throughout the history and evolution of the topic. In this definition, Jacoby (2009) highlighted other words commonly used and related to civic engagement: “social capital,” “citizenship,” “democratic participation,”

“public work,” “social responsibility,” “social justice,” “community building,” “public agency,” and “civic leadership.” Challenges have resulted with the political foundations, persuasions, and leanings of defining civic engagement. For example, “Faculty on the left complain that citizenship education tends to convey images of patriotic flag-waving. More conservative faculty see civic engagement as masking a leftist, activist agenda” (Jacoby, 2009, p. 10). Clearly, these opposing viewpoints leave much room for the discussion and understanding of the importance of this type of academic learning.

Historical Basis of Service-Learning

Barry Checkoway, in “Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University” (2001), wrote:

Education for citizenship becomes more complex in a diverse democratic society in which communication is not “monocultural,” consisting of people who share the same social and cultural characteristics but “multicultural,” with significant differences among groups. For democracy to function successfully in the future, students must be prepared to understand their own identities, communicate with people who are different from themselves, and build bridges across cultural differences in the transition to a more diverse society. -p. 127

Preparing effective citizens is at the core of American higher education. Since the founding of Harvard College in 1636, the value of training active citizens has been emphasized by scholars. American leaders, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, valued the reformation of higher education to be more responsive to the needs of citizens in the country. They considered informed and responsible participation

essential to the success of the democratic experiment (Lawry et al., 2006). Colonial colleges taught classics and piety until university presidents like Yale's Ezra Stiles emphasized debate topics related to independence (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). After the Revolutionary War, the focus of higher education slowly began to shift from the preparation of the individual to the construction of a new nation. The Land-Grant Act passed in 1862 allowed institutions to link public higher education with the concept of civic engagement, as it relates to industry and agriculture (Jacoby, 2009).

John Dewey (1916) has quite possibly been the single most influential leader for the civic role in higher education. His vision for civic engagement specifically related to the liberal arts curriculum in higher education. In *Democracy and Education*, he argued that the liberal arts course of study should consist of three essential elements: engagement of students in the surrounding community, focus on practical problems, and collaboration of students and faculty members. Dewey's emphasis on these three elements demonstrated the vital role universities must play in creating and equipping productive citizens.

During World War II, universities worked closely with the government to address national issues such as education reform to encourage student engagement. Through these efforts, the G.I. Bill and the National Science Foundation were formed. Following these events, the creation of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 linked higher education with the security of our country. With the creation of the Peace Corps in 1961 and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) in 1965, college students became more involved with community service (Jacoby, 2009). The YMCA,

4-H, scouting, fraternities and sororities, and various other programs comprised most of the opportunities for students to get involved (Jacoby, 1996).

In 1978, the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education was formed by blending groups for various field experiences through education and service internships (Jacoby, 2009). Growing apathy in the 1980s yielded concerns that yet again sparked action among scholars insistent on civic engagement. Richard Morrill challenged scholars to focus on education for civic engagement that combined knowledge and action, for “the empowerment of persons and the cultivation of minds” (Cooperative Education Association, 1991, p. 56).

Most scholars agreed the creation of Campus Compact in the mid-1980s was the beginning of more intentional civic engagement in higher education. Campus Compact is a national coalition to promote the highest ideals of American higher education through the promotion of civic engagement and service-learning. University leaders wanted students to have a wide variety of opportunities for community service both on and off their respective college campuses to promote civic engagement as a high priority of institutional agendas. According to *A Promising Connection: Increasing College Access and Success through Civic Engagement* published by Campus Compact, a strong need exists for continued research that will inform institutional best practices and provide insights regarding how we should promote civic engagement to improve overall student learning outcomes. Four specific areas of improvement were highlighted, including the need for further understanding the link between civic engagement and student access and success in college, the implications of institutional context, the actual

process of civic engagement, and the impact of engagement on those who are served (Campus Compact, 2010).

The Big Event was created in 1982 by Joe Nussbaum at Texas A&M. At the time, he was Vice President of the Student Government Association and was charged with creating a community service project to increase student involvement on campus. His goal was to implement two elements of the Campus Compact—involve large numbers of students in the actual process of civic engagement and to do so in a way that was appropriate to the Texas A&M institutional context. At the very same time nationally, President Ronald Reagan issued a call to service through increased community involvement. The President's urging resonated with Nussbaum, and thus the idea of The Big Event was created. The event was initially very small and steadily grew in participation. In the first few years, efforts were made to simply inform students and local citizens about the idea and the potential growth of the movement (Texas A&M University, 2014).

The National and Community Service Act in 1990, which was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush, authorized the Commission on National and Community Service. In 1993, the National and Community Service Trust Act created the Corporation for National and Community Service. This program organized Americans in service opportunities suitable to their interests. Programs included AmeriCorps, USA Freedom Corps, and Learn and Serve America (Jacoby, 2009).

Unfortunately, Texas seems to be behind the national curve in implementing President Bush's goals. For example, an executive summary articulating current issues

pertinent to civic life in Texas was recently released by the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life. On the whole, Texans ranked lower than the rest of the nation regarding political and civic participation (Annette Strauss Institute, 2013). Since 1972, Texas has consistently fallen behind voter turnout in national elections. According to the study, state citizens also demonstrate low civic involvement regarding volunteering, participation in service groups, and philanthropic donations. This trend warrants investigation regarding how higher education institutions are training students to reverse this seemingly perpetual cycle.

Nationally, many scholars have called for a civic renewal and have directed this call to American universities. Because of this imperative, universities are challenged to assess their contributions and answer the call to action. In the last several years, various government educational agencies have assessed needs and potential opportunities for improvement. In particular, recent scholarship has highlighted the ambitions of many schools to enact civic preparation, yet have failed to actually do so (Colby et al., 2010). Contemporary scholars urge professors and Student Affairs administrators to reinvigorate institutional missions and actively promote civic learning. Recent scholarship also provides very specific, localized suggestions for improvement based on school demographics, size, and historical indicators. Without reservation, researchers are appealing to administrators for revisiting these increasingly important issues. In sum, many voices are calling for progress through experiential learning.

It is also important to understand the global landscape regarding civic training in an international context. Campus Compact has published extensive materials

emphasizing the need for “elevating global citizenship by building the international civic engagement movement of higher education” (Campus Compact, 2010). Colleges and universities are poised to significantly contribute with cultivating responsible citizens by continuing to create and sustain programs that support the development of international citizenship. By capitalizing on the upswing of civic engagement initiatives to revive training on American college campuses, Campus Compact is a strong advocate for the use of international civic engagement and service-learning opportunities.

Currently, many American universities are creatively encouraging civic engagement models in their own unique higher education experiences through the inclusion of related and specific majors, minors, and extracurricular experiences available for a variety of students’ interests. All of these advancements led to the creation of the pedagogy called service-learning.

Social Basis of Service-Learning

Service-learning combines community service with academic study (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999) by developing the awareness of the surrounding issues, realizing the problems faced, and appreciating the opportunity for diversity. This opportunity for diversity includes multicultural collaborations and partnerships among various groups to benefit the larger community. Civic engagement should aim to enhance community life and work to resolve concerns through thoughtful and intentional collaboration. Because of this need, many universities have employed the practice of service-learning to link community needs with student learning outcomes. National and institutional research has revealed that combining service with academic content and reflection is best (Jacoby,

2009). Texas A&M has identified this practice as important and worthwhile and has called on campus leadership to create opportunities for facilitating the service-learning process.

Service-learning provides a foundation to develop and acknowledge the source of problems while creating solutions, such as developing a targeted citizenship education training program, toward the advancement of civic engagement during a student's lifetime. The act of reflection, for example in the form of written journaling, is an incredibly important and final step in the overall service-learning experience. Hopefully, the meaning created during the experience will resonate long after the actual experience is complete. The need for service-learning became apparent through a decline in overall involvement. Specifically, many scholars wrote about the decay of American civic health. Putnam (2000) argued, for example, that social capital had eroded in the United States. Social capital concerns the value and relationship of human networks by bonding similar people and bridging among diverse people while including norms of reciprocity (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001). Because of Putnam's criticism for the lack of so-called civic engagement, advocates have worked to right this trend. Texas A&M is one of many institutions seeking to link core values with this call to action.

The Leadership and Service Center at Texas A&M promotes the following definition of service-learning: A form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to promote student learning and development (Jacoby, 2009). According to the Leadership and Service Center, true campus and

community engagement occurs when a student's personal development is fully integrated with learning. This integration is the co-curricular experience. Through intentional programs, services, advising, and advocacy, students are invited to engage in meaningful learning experiences (Texas A&M University, 2014).

Texas A&M is steeped in a rich tradition of leadership training. For example, the Corps of Cadets is a premier organization that develops future leaders who embody the values of honor, courage, integrity, discipline, and selfless service. In doing so, student leaders are prepared for global leadership challenges. Greek Life is another leadership training opportunity on campus. Currently, Texas A&M houses over fifty chapters of fraternities and sororities. These organizations seek to link their own core values with promoting responsible citizenship, sisterhood/brotherhood, strong character, and academic excellence. Texas A&M is also quite friendly. As a visitor, one will most likely be greeted with a hospitable "Howdy!" Also unique to the institution is Fish Camp, the new student orientation structure. Each year, new freshmen are welcomed to Aggie life by immersing themselves in a camp retreat in Palestine, Texas. For many, this camp is an essential time-honored tradition for new Aggies. Tradition plays a large role in the creation and excitement of this event. Other opportunities are available during a student's undergraduate career through the Leadership and Service Center, Memorial Student Center Hospitality, and numerous other organizations (Texas A&M University, 2014). These details highlight the unique resources available to Texas A&M students. These organizations vary in size and structure, yet all are positioned to develop student leaders. Depending on the campus landscape of an institution, the availability of

leadership training resources can be questionable. It is important to establish a concise definition to understand the foundation of civic engagement at a particular institution. In the journal article, “College Learning for the New Global Century,” the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) states:

In a democracy that is diverse, globally engaged, and dependent on citizen responsibilities, all students need an informed concern for the larger good because nothing less will renew our fractured and diminished commons.

-p. 215

Based on my teaching experiences in the Corps of Cadets Hollingsworth Leadership Certificate program, I have observed first-hand the strong desire among Cadets to serve and give back to their institution and country. By facilitating classroom conversations and creating rigorous assignments to promote their growth of knowledge and desire to serve, I have witnessed a clear indication of pursued interest and excellence. Rather than creating passive consumers of these ideals, the Corps of Cadets is intentionally cultivating young American leaders to be tomorrow’s leaders. These resources are continuing to grow as university leaders seek to promote future leadership learning (Texas A&M University, 2014).

National collegiate organizations have also recognized the impact of service-learning opportunities for students. The Mortar Board National Honor Society recognizes seniors who demonstrate superior aspects in scholarship, leadership, and service. The Mortar Board national office released a publication highlighting service-learning as a facet of civic engagement. Nationwide growth and visibility of various

programs through the years have resulted in the advancement of service-learning actions, including opportunities for campus and online course settings. It allows students to engage in the notion of service while also promoting personal growth. In this publication from Mortar Board, it is claimed that service-learning also expands a person's horizons to include perspectives that benefit humankind as a whole (Lee, 2010). Lee also believed colleges and universities should identify the mission and goals to maximize the impact of service-learning. Students must be challenged to think critically, form strong cognitive skills, improve interpersonal communication skills, and develop a strong moral compass to shape their individual leadership abilities.

The progression of service-learning at Texas A&M demonstrates commitment in providing opportunities for students to be involved with extracurricular activities in hands-on leadership positions. With selfless service as an institutional core value, the administration, faculty, and students have the framework in place to pursue the continued expansion of service-learning. Next, I introduce the student development theories used to underpin my research and analysis.

Student Development and Leadership Theories

An excerpt from The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement's *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, issued in 2012, confirms the powerful utility of engaged students working to create positive change in today's world. The document states:

A socially cohesive and economically vibrant United States democracy... require[s] informed, engaged, open-minded, and socially responsible people

committed to the common good and practiced in ‘doing’ democracy... Civic learning needs to be an integral component of every level of education, from grade school through graduate school, across all fields of study. -p. 14

This quote captures the call to action targeting college students today. College students are our future national and international leaders in government, education, policy, and the sciences. The intersection of actions, values, and determination creates the opportunity to study undergraduate service and leadership from a student development theory perspective.

In the last several decades, Student Affairs professionals have assumed the roles of both “integrator and educator” while promoting student development theories “as the backbone of the profession” (Hoffman, 1996, p.10). The mission, focus, and functions of Student Affairs professionals stem from the theories found in the pertinent literature. Through the years, literature has been used as a way to bolster and legitimize the profession while urging a sense of “change and inclusion to the broader university, mainly including faculty and administrators” (p.10). As Student Affairs professionals have worked to maintain their relevancy in higher education’s ever-changing environments, increased scrutiny in the 1980s and 1990s prompted educators to link theory and practice in meaningful ways (Altbach et al., 2001; Thelin, 2004). This scrutiny included questionable learning outcomes involving civic engagement and students’ inclination toward service.

It is imperative for Student Affairs professionals and faculty members to understand student development theory and embrace the opportunities for mentorship

and influence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In recent years, student development theory has expanded to examine the needs of diverse student populations. Today, student development theories seek to accommodate diverse students while guiding Student Affairs professionals in life-changing work. Translating theory to practice is a complicated process, yet is critical to achieve maximum student learning (Brown & Barr, 1990).

Sanford (1967) suggested that development is a growth process in which the individual becomes increasingly positioned to understand and act on lived experiences and influences. Rogers (1990) defined student development as “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capacities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (p. 27). Very importantly, Rogers summarized the philosophy as “concern for the development of the whole person” (p. 27). By emphasizing the importance of educating the holistic student, this statement precisely frames the utility and value of using student development theory to understand, enhance, and further develop opportunities with extracurricular learning and growth.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I focus on the use of student development theory as both a growth process for the individual and as a programmatic function provided by the school. Ultimately, I align with Miller and Prince (1976) and suggest that student development is “the application of human development concepts in postsecondary settings so that everyone involved can master increasingly complex developmental tasks, achieve self-direction, and become interdependent” (p. 3). Very importantly, I believe what Student Affairs professionals do to promote learning and

growth will ultimately define the power and impact of student development theories and practices.

In the following, I detail Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory and Servant Leadership as inspired by Greenleaf's research. I see each of these theories as foundational and critical to my dissertation study.

Generational Theory

Generational Theory proposes an understanding of college students' behaviors and beliefs, based on their age, cultural influences, and peer expectations of normalcy (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Student Affairs professionals engage in a variety of responsibilities with students on any given day. All of these activities require the professional to understand "how each student is unique, how students function as groups, and how students in the aggregate respond to and shape the campus environment" (Coomes & DeBard, 2004, p. 6).

Howe and Strauss (2000) defined Millennials as "the next great generation." Defined as young Americans born in 1982 or after, Millennials are the largest, most affluent, and ethnically diverse generation ever in American history. Specifically, Howe and Strauss claimed Millennials exhibit characteristics of being sheltered, pressured, high-achieving, and team-oriented. They appear knowledgeable in worldly subjects yet naive to the broader issues facing society today. Importantly, the way that different generations communicate has strong implications for day-to-day interactions. Millennials prefer mobile, electronic communication that allows them to remain on-the-go (Twenge et al., 2010).

Millennials are the generation most inclined to be positive change agents by representing societal progress through informed and innovative ways. In a 2009 *USA Today* news article, Andrea Stone reported an interview with a Millennial student at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The student stated, “*Giving back is our own way of being empowered to create a positive change within the community*” (p. 2). As stated in the quote, this generation demonstrates a strong desire to become involved, and they eagerly pursue their goals while maintaining a sense of respect for authorities (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Strauss and Howe (1991) proposed the term “peer personality” as a way by which to understand Generational Theory. Peer personality is defined as the “generational persona recognized and determined by common age, location, common beliefs and behavior, and perceived membership in a common generation” (p. 64). For example, Millennials are credited with being more service-minded and team-oriented than any other generation for a variety of reasons. This generation was raised during the 9/11 attacks as well as through national devastations such as Hurricane Katrina. Because of this, Student Affairs professionals have an important opportunity to utilize the interest and talents of this generation (Stone, 2009).

Specifically, studying the Millennials through a “peer personality” lens allows practitioners a better way to identify students’ needs (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Furthermore, intergenerational conflicts can be understood and potentially reconciled by acknowledging the differences and similarities with attention to issues of race and class. According to Strauss and Howe, each generation has its own biography, one that tells the

story of the characteristics and how those directly influence and impact the future. Because each generation engages with one another, this two-part interplay results in a “generational diagonal.” According to Coomes and DeBard, “the generational diagonal acknowledges that generations are not static; they move through time influencing and being influenced by important historical events and other generations” (p. 8). Because generations affect one another, it is necessary to understand how all work together. Although generational differences exist, the Millennials choose to address these differences in a spirit of unification and collaboration (Gerdes, 2006). The concept of biography strongly ties to the value and utility of narrative and the impact it has on the generation’s society.

Student Affairs practitioners must learn to play to the strengths of Millennials. For example, higher education literature explains that Millennials respect competence and expect information and instruction to succeed (Robinette, 2009). Millennials also need feedback and encouragement to make their own decisions. They also prefer to work in teams rather than on individual assignments. This specifically applies to The Big Event from a logistical perspective with organizing the students for accomplishing the service work. Advisors should be aware of these specific characteristics of Millennials to inform their roles as mentors to the students.

The current generation of incoming college students presents an enormous amount of opportunities and challenges. When used to promote the greater good, social media proficiency can be used for unlimited impact. As suggested by Wilson & Gerber (2008), students have an internal drive that motivates them to contribute to society in

meaningful ways. Loeb (1999) also highlighted the important calling of social involvement placed on an individual's life. According to Loeb, our current actions as a generation send "ripples of influence into the future" (p. 119). More specifically, Loeb offered meaning to personal stories, values, and priorities by positioning the individual as a powerful influence for societal change.

Although Strauss and Howe's original research was based on large surveys reaching thousands of people, criticisms remain. One of the most obvious limitations of applying Generational Theory is the risk of stereotyping certain student populations in a category that is not representative of their actual identity. Overgeneralizations are also a risk of applying Generational Theory (Deal et al., 2010).

Aggie Millennials serve both older and younger generations during The Big Event, which is a clear example of boundary spanning through service. During this specific time in Texas A&M history, Millennials are constructing our understandings of The Big Event.

Servant Leadership

My research study investigates how engaged Aggies consider themselves agents of change (McEarlean, 2009). Servant Leadership is both a theoretical framework and a philosophy. In this context, I define philosophy as a broad general belief or set of beliefs, while a theory is a suggestion or speculation about why an experience is occurring. In the following, Servant Leadership will be presented from both perspectives.

The foundations of Servant Leadership are based on a philosophy of Greenleaf who launched the movement in 1970 with the publication of his groundbreaking essay,

The Servant as Leader. This revolutionary article was a result of his efforts to understand how (and if) service causes students to become more autonomous and servant-like. Greenleaf identified the importance of a leader feeling the need to be a servant while answering a call to action through service to others. The Chief Executive Officer of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership echoed the need for the program and called for “leaders on our campuses who are committed to fundamental values, demonstrate the importance of high ethical standards, and have the courage to raise questions about purpose, direction, and the means to each end” (p. 5).

Servant Leadership has strong underpinnings steeped in Biblical contexts. Since many assumptions of Servant Leadership are inspired by religious values, it is important to understand how the framework can be applied in a non-religious context. Servant Leadership prompts students to not only value certain ideals but to also act on those as well. Possessing personal values has implications, and it is important to understand how Servant Leadership uniquely positions students to serve in a meaningful way.

According to Wheeler (2012), Servant Leadership has ten principles, including:

- *Service to Others is the Highest Priority*
- *Facilitate Meeting the Needs of Others*
- *Foster Problem Solving and Taking Responsibility at All Levels*
- *Promote Emotional Healing in People and the Organization*
- *Means are Important as Ends*

- *Keep One Eye on the Present and One on the Future*
- *Embrace Paradoxes and Dilemmas*
- *Leave a Legacy to Society*
- *Model Servant Leadership*
- *Develop More Servant Leaders*

Johnson (2001) asserted the advantages of Servant Leadership as altruism, simplicity, and self-awareness. Perhaps most importantly, Servant Leadership “meets students where they are” to teach them principles they are already inclined to do and enjoy. By tapping into service-minded Millennials seeking to assist their communities, Student Affairs professionals are not only teaching the mind, yet the heart as well.

Some critics question the “backbone” of Servant Leadership. In other words, some speculate Servant Leadership is too soft. Others also ask if these leaders make hard decisions in times of adversity. Wheeler (2012) dismissed these challenges by dispelling common misconceptions about Servant Leadership. Because it was created in 1970, some observers criticize the limited scholarship offered on the subject. Much of the literature appears to be repetitive with limited and questionable data, which is frustrating to many readers. Eicher-Catt (2005) strongly criticized the gendered rhetoric of Servant Leadership and called for a re-evaluation of its mythical influence. Specifically, this piece of critical feminist deconstruction raised questions about Servant Leadership theory. This critique, which specifically criticizes the male dominant term “servant leader” by explaining its gender biased origin, is one of many which finds fault with the foundational underpinnings of the discourse in both its definition and application. Each

year, The Big Event student Co-Director selects a book to read with the executive team.

At the end of weekly meetings, the executive team members discuss the assigned reading material. In Spring 2014, the executive team read *The Servant: A Simple Story about the True Essence of Leadership* by James C. Hunter (1998). *The Servant* is a classic narrative of business literature related to the principles of Servant Leadership. By following this conceptual framework, Servant Leadership literature is presented to The Big Event student executives as a business approach to use while guiding the organization. More detailed analysis of the text and student usage is discussed in Chapters III and IV.

Servant Leadership is a foundational element of The Big Event training curriculum. The executive leadership team members use the principles of Servant Leadership to ground their experiences. Although changes in oversight and management with The Big Event have led to adjustments in the emphasis placed on teaching Servant Leadership, many of the guiding principles are discussed often and reinforced during the academic year.

As higher education is called on to renew its historic commitment to civic engagement, service-learning remains a powerful form of experiential education. At this same time, higher education must consider its effectiveness with the fundamental goal of student learning. With more college students seeking to volunteer, a natural link to these areas of need and interest is service-learning. It is also important to consider the implications of cognitive development on student learning, as researched by Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan, when planning these activities (Peck Parrott, 2013). Reflection

and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. Service-learning incorporates these two involvement strategies.

In closing, Generational Theory and Servant Leadership are pertinent with regard to the motivations of students committed to service at Texas A&M. By understanding how and why students are motivated to invest in their local communities through service, more informed training and action can result. Next, I present the use of narrative analysis in this study.

Function and Engagement of Narrative Analysis

In Spring 2012, I took Dr. James Aune's rhetoric course, American Public Discourse Since 1865. In this course, he suggested that I investigate narrative methods more closely to see how they are related to my own research. I quickly realized my strong interest in using narrative theory in my coursework and research. In this course, he urged me to reflect on my past experiences to understand and energize my future goals. In Fall 2012, Dr. Aune taught a unit dedicated to narrative in our Textual Methods course. He used the works of Fisher, White, Lewis, and other scholars to provide a strong basis of explanation regarding the use of narrative in rhetorical theory. These two courses, along with his urging of me to consider the value and utility of narrative in my own work, prompted me to identify and engage with this subject today. I am forever grateful for his guidance and realization of my professional interests and capabilities.

Per Dr. Aune's recommendation, I read *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 2008). I found this book to be influential in my understandings of American civic life, and it served as a useful frame to understand national history and trends. Although the book

has been criticized for its socioeconomic bias and political polarization of left and right wing parties, the reading stands as one of the most compelling explanations of American individualism. Specifically, critics have highlighted Bellah's narrow focus regarding how American culture has been shaped and the role of religion. Other critics have accused Bellah of crusading for religious priorities in an overt, dismissive way of other nonconforming ideologies. The following quote, from *Habits of the Heart*, shares the importance of asking good questions and urging people to tell their story. There is great strength, unity, and commonality in sharing our personal stories, and this quote illuminates the opportunities laden in storytelling:

How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live? Who are we...?

These are questions we have asked our fellow citizens... We engaged them in conversations about their lives and about what matters most to them, talked about their families and communities, their doubts and uncertainties, and their hopes and fears with respect to the larger society. We found them eager to discuss... These are important matters to those to whom we talked... Many doubt that we have enough in common to be able mutually to discuss our central aspirations and fears. It is one of our purposes to persuade them that we do.

-p. xlvii

By embracing this quote, organizations like The Big Event can situate itself into larger meanings and purposes in American civic life. Using The Big Event as a vessel to reach people through service, student volunteers exemplify and enact his notion of who we are and how we ought to live through their commitment as servant leaders.

Narrative theory is understood in two distinct ways. First, narrative of the self describes how a person makes sense of his or her own experiences by telling stories that highlight and reflect personal values and experiences (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). In the process of constructing and telling stories, s/he develops and refines his/her individual identity. Gergen and Gergen (1983) explained self-narrative as “an individual’s account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time” (p. 255). These narratives create order and are essential to establishing an individual’s sense of meaning and purpose (Bettelheim, 1976). By utilizing narrative in this way, individuals attempt to link coherence among various life experiences. According to Gergen and Gergen (1983), there are three forms of narrative: stability, progressive, and regressive. These forms explain how narratives work within an evaluative space. Stability refers to the linkage of experiences while maintaining unchanged beliefs and attitudes. Development through narrative is also achieved by progression or regression. Here, the utility of narrative moves a person’s sense of self and worth to more positive or negative results. The social utility of these narrative forms allows people to find value in establishing and sustaining organizations based on sharing this content and then creating narrative within appropriate social interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 1983).

A second version of narrative theory views narrative as a tool for enacting persuasion (Fisher, 1984; 1987). As such, stories are shared with others in order to change attitudes, beliefs, or to prompt audience members to take action (Fisher, 1987; Hart & Daughton, 2005; Warnick, 1987). This model has been applied to both the

political rhetoric and to internal and external organizational communication (Weick & Browning, 1986; Brown, 1990).

Fisher (1987) developed the narrative paradigm with the assertion that essentially all communication is storytelling. He claimed that people are basic storytellers, and he quoted this broad view of narrative as “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (Fisher, 1987, p. 58). Riessman described the function as “narratives structure perceptual experience [and] organize memory,” while Mumby emphasized that “narratives function to construct the social reality that constitutes the lived world of social actors” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2; Mumby, 1993, p. 5). White explained the historian’s view of writing as “value attached to narrativity in the representation... of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, ... of people and events” (White, 1981, p. 23).

In his 1984 book, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, Fisher asserted the importance of good arguments and the value of narration. According to him, a story is the most powerful way to reach an audience. He argued that the intended audience will judge narratives based on their own experiences (Fisher, 1987). Fisher provided two evaluative concepts for stories, narrative coherence and fidelity. Coherence refers to the ability to make sense of the story’s message and the way a story resonates with the audience so they can initiate action or a change in beliefs. Fidelity refers to how the message “rings true” to the audience through past experiences and knowledge. Values, according to Fisher, are what make stories

persuasive. They convince audiences to reinforce what they already believe or to accept new ideas that “make sense” because they match their own values (Fisher, 1987).

This study of The Big Event is also grounded in an understanding of narrative theory from both the identity-construction and rhetorical perspectives. In broad terms, literary history scholars have defined the function of narrative to include imitations of the world’s reality, personal expressions of the storyteller, and the entertainment of an audience. In modern times, Communication scholars have conceptualized narrative’s function as a structured order to organize and understand experiences (Jasinski, 2001; May & Mumby, 2005; Miller, 2003; Weick & Browning, 1986).

Rhetorical Engagement of Narrative

Two specific types of engaged narrative include the instrumental and constitutive approaches. The instrumental approach uses argument and persuasion, while the constitutive approach emphasizes proclamations of ideology and allegiance. To achieve the desired effects with the audience, narrators employ aesthetic qualities to bring alive the drama and power of language that will appeal to the listeners’ emotions and acceptance of the narrative’s theme (Jasinski, 2001). The rhetorical influences of the aesthetic theme date back to Aristotle’s foundational contributions. His classic study, *Poetics*, described literary arts as *mimetic*, or imitations of the real world (Aristotle, 1954a). His analysis of drama was the first recorded literary theory focusing on tragedy and comedy. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle’s analysis of persuasion developed as the basic universal system of rhetorical language as we study today (Aristotle, 1954b).

The instrumental approach is defined as the effect of a *didactic* narrative's delivery on an audience when persuasion and argument are used. The term, *didactic*, is defined by using profound messages of moral urgency. Examples include oratories to address, confront, and solve real life problems, controversial issues, and organizational challenges (Jasinski, 2001). Communication scholars have researched many narrative works and have contributed to the understanding of how persuasion and argument empower the narrator's effect on the audience.

With the constitutive approach, narrative persuasion is present in our everyday lives. Films, short stories, and other forms of storytelling make personal, long-lasting impressions in surprising and deeply profound ways. The stories we gather from our everyday lived experiences dictate how we view the world in which we live. To date, academic literature largely overlooks the impact of persuasive narrative on our personal attitudes (Perloff, 2010). Rather, advocacy messages and other forms of deliberate messaging are central to the art of persuasive narrative techniques. Here again, Charland (1987) asserts the critical moment when the rhetor unites the audience through shared identification.

Organizational Engagement of Narrative

Related to this study of The Big Event, the development of organizational communication theory has strengthened with the use of storytelling (Tompkins, 1984). In the mid 1980s, Mumby examined the power structure of organizations and how the use of narrative affirms ideology and rationality. Organizational narratives are analyzed to understand how participants are positioned in the internal social structure (Mumby,

1987). May and Mumby also suggested that narrative is increasingly becoming the best medium to describe human action. According to their findings, story elements provide a composite picture, a web of relationships, a framework of enablers and barriers, a schedule of action, and a structure of conversations within the organization (May & Mumby, 2005).

Contemporary Communication scholars have developed and critiqued narrative to determine its function and effectiveness in organizational settings. The interrelationship of organizational rationality, as defined by rules and policies, and storytelling will be key to understanding how leaders most effectively communicate with members (Jasinski, 2001). It is also important to account for how members will best communicate to leaders and to each other. Ideological elements of narrative, such as argument, are adapted from traditional rhetorical discourse.

Sensemaking

Among other benefits, stories become natural to sensemaking, a communicative device used with examining the informational system within an organization (Bruner, 1991). Narrative is considered by organizational communication scholars to be a medium of sensemaking. It provides a mirror of people and experiences to explain the organizational context where involvement is happening. Sensemaking produces meaning to experiences with enactment of information that must be interpreted to determine how it fits the organization's expectations. Referred to as "conversation-as-text," enacting of experiences produces conformity to people's expectations so that interpretations can be made (Miller, 2003). Miller's book includes a detailed description of sensemaking with

the critical components found within the information environment setting. The enactment process results when organization members interpret various meanings from information and react accordingly. Browning and McNamee's (2012) qualitative research of temporary work arrangements also utilized sensemaking processes to study roles and behaviors of internal interim leaders. Weick and Browning also suggested "if a manager can argue logically with facts and then cover the same points with stories that ring true and hold together, then he or she has understood the issue more thoroughly" (1986, p. 255). In this quote, the coherence and fidelity of stories enforce Fisher's influence in organizational communication. Sensemaking strongly connects to the understanding of The Big Event environment.

Organizational Storytelling

Through the years, leaders of The Big Event have perpetuated its growth by the use of storytelling and narrative to build tradition, create excitement, and advance the organizational mission. Brown (1990) studied the characteristics and functions of storytelling as a dominant force in an organization. Specifically, reduction of uncertainty is reinforced as with Weick and Browning (1986) to accomplish stronger communication with the use of narrative. Furthermore, understanding the organization in a better way will be accomplished if the stories are legitimate and relate to the members' needs in the organization. Additionally, temporality is an important ingredient to organizational stories (Cunliffe et al., 2004). Defined as a sequential time framework, narrative offers past, present, and future references in story development.

Boje (2001) offered alternative narrative methods for organizational and Communication research. As an example, the antenarrative is used in an organization to “acknowledge the fragmented, collective, situated, and performative nature of organizational stories and storytelling” (Barge, 2004, p. 106). The grand narrative, a story device, infamously developed by Lyotard, is also an example of antenarrative.

As a further example of similarities, Carlson (1989; 1995) studied personal identity issues in narrative featuring autobiographies and testimonies. These true-life stories are functional because they portray the power of personal life stories in vivid illustrations. These compelling and real accounts provide strong appeal to the audience in any setting. Carlson detailed, “the creation of an autobiographical narrative is a valuable tool in the reclaiming of the creator’s own life and character. The narrator has the potential to overcome the binary thinking inherent in traditional logic to form a realm where difference is empowering” (1995, p. 418). By (re)creating a personal sense of identity in this way, people find value and make meaning. Implications from this research of The Big Event provide the opportunity for groups to see themselves in positive, transformative ways.

Perhaps the most universally applicative aspect of narrative demonstrates how scholars can observe and research an experience by making use of storytelling and involving participants in action. This includes the recording of an experience to translate the larger picture of interpreting the situation at hand. The scholar can illustrate from the narrative an explanation of the observed people and events so as to gain a better understanding of the purpose of that experience for a meaningful whole (Stacks &

Salwen, 2009). Conrad's (1990) study of narrative revealed concerns about the use of interpretive research utilizing narrative in an organizational setting. Because of the problematic issues involved with the inherent subjectivity of narrative, outcomes of ethnographic research must be considered carefully.

Burke's theory of identification and consubstantiality described the human values of relating to others "like" them. Stories can appeal to transcendent values that may "ring true" differently for various audiences, and yet still create a sense of unification. In the Introduction of *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke began with a question: "What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" Burke's pentad of elements is necessary to understanding the rhetoric of a textual narrative, and he observed that any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answer to the questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose) (Burke, 1957).

I am utilizing narrative theory, and I seek to understand meaning and how populations make sense of their experiences and roles in the world. As an example, the use of narrative theory will allow for an in-depth analysis of larger structures influencing decisions and actions. "The call of narrative is the inspiration to find language that is adequate to the obscurity and darkness of experience" (Bochner, 2000, p. 266). More specifically, the utility of self-narrative allows researchers to extract meaning from the experience rather than exactly how it is lived. In the following, I articulate the justification of this dissertation study as well as my research questions.

Justification of Study

A study of The Big Event is important in a variety of ways. By understanding how the student executives of this large campus organization describe their leadership development and motivations for service with the use of narrative, I hope to identify both the theoretical underpinnings regarding the current organizational structure and future best practices that have emerged over time. With researching a successful model of a large student service project in American higher education, the mission and goals of The Big Event are studied in connection with the institutional core values at Texas A&M.

By understanding how the use of narrative relates to studying contexts specifically within Student Affairs, practitioners can consider this study's research in continuing the critical work of maximizing an Aggie student's development during the college years and beyond graduation. Ultimately, expanded opportunities for integrating a student's leadership and service development with the academic curriculum can be considered in weighing the advantages and costs of implementing more service-learning activities at Texas A&M. Continued and careful attention to outcomes assessment of service-learning is necessary to determine improvements and directions for the future.

The Big Event at Texas A&M communicates the perceived importance of service and leadership and then translates this message with an annual day of service in March for the Bryan/College Station community. During this research, I offer answers regarding how the organization was founded, how it is maintained, and why it seeks to function. Specifically, I uncover understandings of how student, professional, and

community voices are expressed and managed through The Big Event and what the current organization, structure, and event will offer for future growth and improvement opportunities within academic settings. Furthermore, I seek to apply student development theory as a useful lens for understanding the motivations of students who serve through The Big Event. Ultimately, I seek to contribute “socially relevant” engaged scholarship to “translate my findings into practice” while “targeting relevant professional communities” (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008, pp. 251-252). Engaged scholarship creates an exciting opportunity to connect theoretical and practical knowledge (Barge, Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Eisenberg, 2005; Seibold, 2005; Simpson, 2005; Stohl, 2005).

Texas A&M asserts the value of student service, and efforts have been made to improve faculty knowledge and pedagogy for service-learning in Aggie classrooms. Texas A&M prioritizes selfless service as an institutional core value, and as such, implemented its inaugural Service-Learning Faculty Fellows (SLFF) program in 2013, the first initiative of this type in the school’s history (Texas A&M University, 2014). I argue Texas A&M tells a story based on my narrative analysis to portray the values of commitment to others and the importance of connecting what is taught in school with civic action. Each storied detail is important to the heritage and tradition of the school. Because of this, Texas A&M has an opportunity to foster productive citizenship. A student’s experiences provide a specific foundation for tradition, pride, and values unique to that school. In this way, stories contribute to and shape the heritage and tradition passed from student to student through the years. Texas A&M is a model

institution in this way because Aggies are trained early in their careers to follow the school's core values, including the pursuit of selfless service.

Specifically, I wanted to learn from my research findings and cultivate meaningful implications for future Big Events and expanded service-learning opportunities in the coming years. As such, the following research questions were proposed for my study:

- 1) How do the leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M?
- 2) What is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion?

By linking my two dominant research interests, organizational rhetoric and higher education theory, this study provides rich and meaningful results for improved best practices in civic engagement and service-learning in higher education.

In the following, I introduce and explain the research methodology for this dissertation. I will then describe my findings in Chapter III, followed by a discussion and explanation of implications, limitations, and future directions in Chapters IV and V.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The description of persons, places, and events has been the cornerstone of qualitative research. I believe it will remain the cornerstone, because this is the qualitative researcher's reason for being... Validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation and whether or not the explanation fits the description. In other words, is the explanation credible? In addition, qualitative researchers do not claim that there is only one way of interpreting an event.

There is no one 'correct' interpretation... Becoming immersed in a study requires passion: Passion for people, passion for communication, and passion for understanding people. This is the contribution of qualitative research, and it can only enhance educational and human services practice... In the qualitative arena the individual is not only inserted into the study, the individual is the backbone of the study... Now it is time to return to a discourse on the personal, on what it means to be alive. We need to capture the lived experience of individuals and their stories...

-Janesick, 2000, p. 393

In this study, I used qualitative methods to cultivate deep understandings of the research subject. Qualitative research is an exciting opportunity to create unique, contributive scholarship while embarking on a personalized journey tailored to individual research interests. Certainly no two qualitative research design-making paths

look exactly the same, largely in part to the purpose and outcomes of the scholar's work. With the use of observational and participatory methods that define qualitative research, I explored experiences within The Big Event, became involved with the participants' activities, collected pertinent data for analysis, and suggested informed conclusions about the experiences.

Qualitative research offers a plan by which to develop a complex depiction of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting by multiple participants, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Ultimately, researchers seek to provide a holistic account of the research scene. I had an exciting opportunity to immerse myself in the research scene and attempted to make sense of what I observed (Tracy, 2013). I examined people's behaviors and the structures that encourage, shape, and constrain such actions.

The interpretive paradigm asserts that knowledge and reality are constructed and reproduced through communication, interaction, and practice (Tracy, 2013). I focused on these three primary factors during my work as the researcher. Considering the goals I had previously presented about my dissertation topic, I utilized participant observation, interviews, textual analysis, and visual analysis. Each of these methods proved to be insightful and facilitated meaningful research results.

During this study, I encouraged participant cooperation and negotiated access in an ongoing process (Tracy, 2013). Various exploratory methods were incorporated to record the progress and the journey of access for the project. Specifically, seeking informed consent while finalizing the access issue was completed to ensure the

willingness of participants to share their words, thoughts, and experiences. Once access was gained, the research proposal was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Researcher *as* the Instrument

As individuals, we are all layered in complicated, yet incredibly meaningful ways. Qualitative researchers seek to contribute to scholarly work by using their own unique voice to offer rich insights. In qualitative research, the researcher *is* the instrument by which studies are conducted and analyzed. Scholars seek to understand meaning and how populations make sense of their experiences.

In this research study, I made interpretations of what I saw, heard, and understood. I could not be separated from my own background, history, context, values, and prior understandings. As a researcher, I am concerned with both the process of research and the outcomes. To this end, the embodied act of research produced a unique harvest of data and conclusions yielded by my role *as* the instrument.

In the following, I describe the local community of Bryan/College Station, Texas. In doing so, I seek to detail the scene and capture its uniqueness. Additional elements surrounding The Big Event are also described at length. The chapter continues with information regarding my methodology and research procedures. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a summary of my personal role as a researcher.

The Scene: Aggieland

College Station, Texas is a city of approximately 100,000 residents. Founded during the opening of Texas A&M College, the city's name was derived from the train

station located on the west side of town (City of College Station, TX, 2014). The neighboring city of Bryan is a slightly smaller municipality with a population of almost 81,000 residents (City of Bryan, TX, 2014). In College Station, life is pleasant, neighbors are friendly, and most activity centers around the University. Home of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and National Archives, the Bonfire Memorial, and the Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History, the city offers many local attractions and places of interest (Visit Aggieland, 2014). In July 2013, College Station was named the third best place to live, according to Kiplinger's Personal Finance List of "2013 Top Ten Places to Live" (*The Eagle*, 2014). Consideration for this distinction was based upon economic growth, wages, job growth, education, housing affordability, cultural amenities, and healthcare.

The Scene, Continued: "There's a Spirit That Can Ne'er Be Told"

The Big Event is the largest single day of university campus service in the country. Dating back to 1982, thousands of Aggie students organize themselves one Saturday each year to give back to their Bryan/College Station community. Founded by Joe Nussbaum, then Vice President of the Student Government Association at Texas A&M, The Big Event was created as a way for students to say "thank you" to the local area. The Leadership and Service Center in the Office of Student Activities at Texas A&M supervises this annual service project and provides a Student Development Specialist to advise the student executives for The Big Event. This person guides the student executives during planning and execution (Texas A&M University, 2014). The Big Event mission statement reads:

Through service-oriented activities, The Big Event promotes campus and community unity as students come together for one day to express their gratitude for the support from the surrounding community.

-The Big Event website

The Big Event is a student organization that upholds the ideals of unity and service, two core values at Texas A&M. Projects range from painting, lawn work, cleaning, and other similar tasks. The interaction between Aggie students and local residents created on this day exemplifies a unique unifying tradition unparalleled at other American universities.

Texas A&M's purpose statement reads, "To develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good" (Texas A&M University, 2014). This mission is exemplified by the six institutional core values, including excellence, integrity, leadership, loyalty, respect, and selfless service. A former Corps Commandant LTG John Van Alstyne once said, "If you don't want to be a leader of character, don't come here." Aggies have an immense sense of loyalty for fellow students, both current and former. Regarding selfless service, former United States President George H. W. Bush stated, "A&M encourages volunteerism, encourages being one of a thousand points of light, helping others... and it comes naturally to Aggies" (Texas A&M University, 2014). This spirit was one of his deciding factors when he chose Texas A&M as the site for his Presidential Library. In keeping with this strong spirit, current and former students are encouraged to stay involved during their lifetimes as part of the Aggie Network, also known as the Association of Former Students. This network currently includes over 417,000 students since its creation in 1876 (Texas A&M University, 2014). Through

major programming and alumni events, The Association of Former Students sustains a powerful Aggie presence around the world.

Smaller versions of The Big Event are now operating at an estimated 110 other schools beyond Texas A&M. The Big Event Conference, held each year in February, is an opportunity for schools to come together and discuss how their individual Big Events, or other one day service projects, operate. It is also an opportunity for schools with young service programs to meet with experienced executives from other Big Events to learn more about logistics, planning, preparation, and improvements. It is also intended to unite Big Events across the nation to help form the One Big Day vision. This vision seeks to create and sustain one big day of service, including a common logo and promotional materials.

After thirty years of serving the Bryan/College Station community, The Big Event has gone global. Most recently, three Big Events occurred in Europe, while one took place in Pakistan. International institutions of higher education in Barcelona, Spain; Bonn, Germany; Sydney, Australia; Castiglion Fiorentino, Italy; and Jamshoro, Pakistan have recently provided opportunities for abroad Aggies to give back in their local communities. The opportunity of extending The Big Event to global communities is very exciting for many. The process of translating and enacting the concept of selfless service has proven to be somewhat difficult in various cultures around the world. Other issues, such as travel restrictions for students, make completing international service in foreign destinations a challenging feat. At this time, only Texas A&M students are allowed to participate, yet university leaders hope to expand service opportunities to international

students at host institutions in the next few years (Texas A&M University, 2014). More detailed accounts of The Big Event opportunities abroad will be discussed in Chapter III. Undoubtedly, The Big Event at Texas A&M has created numerous opportunities for Aggie students to understand and appreciate the role of civic engagement including community/university partnerships since its creation in 1982. Participation has increased significantly, and approximately 20,000 students completed almost 2,000 jobs in 2014.

The People: Aggies

The Big Event student executives, including the Director and Co-Director, are selected in the spring prior to the term they serve. For example, The Big Event executive officers for the 2013-2014 academic year were selected in April 2013. As such, executive officers are given the summer to become acquainted with one another, transition into their positions with the guidance of former officers, and then quickly immerse themselves in new roles as members of “Exec.” When the fall begins, preparations start for the process of selecting committee members. These selections are conducted in the middle of the fall semester, and all positions are confirmed by the beginning of winter break. Executive team members dedicate substantial time to the planning and recruitment period in the fall.

Through years of preparation and considerable trial and error, current executive teams profit from the efforts of their previous counterparts. The meeting structure, master task list, and overall logistical structure are passed down from year to year. Obvious revisions are made based on previous experience, yet much of the basic structure is recycled. For example, agenda templates and content are saved and revised

to maintain consistency and preserve traditional preparatory work. A high priority is to ensure that executive members are adequately prepared to complete their jobs while also training their subordinates to grow as leaders and teammates.

The spring semester of The Big Event is the beginning of the most work-intensive time of the year for the student leaders. Weekly executive meetings, along with weekly committee meetings, strongly demand their time and attention. Spring meetings are typically held each week in the Memorial Student Center. A standard agenda covers the content of the meeting, and order is established and maintained by the Director. The Big Event is held on the fourth Saturday of March, and because of this, strong action is taken as soon as the spring semester begins.

Individual donors and corporate sponsors help make The Big Event possible. The Big Event executives seek these funds through channels such as The Association of Former Students and the Texas A&M Foundation. Cold calls to companies and organizations both near and far are always essential. These funds (or gifts in-kind) are used for various purposes during the year, and these include The Big Event Conference materials, promotional items, use of dining hall, t-shirts for Day Of, kickoff rally stage, and tools used for completing the projects. The Student Government Association also allocates funds as a contribution to this event.

The Narrative Tools: Research of “Giving Back”

In this research project, I aspired to investigate narratives, supplied by interviews and conversations, that uncovered larger understandings of discourse related to service in higher education contexts. Specifically, I was curious to discover how Texas A&M

constructs service and “giving back” as important and necessary to Aggies. Furthermore, I hoped to eventually connect my findings to support the use of service-learning in more Communication courses. I researched details of The Big Event to determine the theoretical underpinnings and methods.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I gained entry to all meetings, training sessions, and historical data collected in an on-campus archive through my involvement with the Leadership and Service Center. I met with The Big Event advisors and leadership team to discuss a research plan that would not interfere with their goals and logistics. I also kept a detailed record of this journey. Thankfully, the advisors and leadership team were very willing to assist me in my research endeavors.

Interpretive researchers collect multiple forms of data, including interviews, observations, documents, and visual communication related to their research scene. I reviewed and made sense of the data by organizing the information in themes or categories that cut across various sources. Next, I discuss the qualitative practice of participant observation.

Participant Observation

Participant observation, also known as fieldwork, is “a method through which researchers generate understanding and knowledge by watching, interacting, asking questions, collecting documents, making audio or video recordings, and reflecting after the fact” (Tracy, 2013, p. 65). During the research process, I spent considerable hours in meetings, planning sessions, trainings, and other related events to immerse myself in a variety of opportunities for analysis. I shadowed The Big Event executive team to

observe how they instruct and facilitate the leadership training skills needed for the event. I cultivated a feeling of trust among the students so they became comfortable with my attendance and research process.

I participated in all available opportunities to spend time with the leaders as the project developed. I was available as much as possible and gained rich data for answering my research questions. I enacted a participant-as-observer role while acknowledging my research purposes during the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

As one who often takes notes about my daily tasks and responsibilities, the journaling aspect of these endeavors was natural and enjoyable. I strived for my fieldnotes to contain as much information about the scenes as I could detail. By providing thick description, defined as the way in which researchers immerse themselves in a scene and report the particulars of that scene (Geertz, 1973; Ellingson, 2009), I sought to generate deep understandings.

Interviews

I received approval to conduct the interviews from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in March 2014, and I promptly proceeded. I requested consent forms to be signed for each in-person interview. Initially, I gained access to these interviewees by attending weekly planning meetings. During this time, I sought to establish rapport and credibility before their interviews. All student executives initially confirmed their willingness to be involved in the study, and I then followed up with them via email formally asking for their participation.

Interviews were conducted both in-person and via email (see Interview Guide in Appendix). Students were asked to interview only in-person before the end of the spring semester, yet this proved to be complicated. I then chose to email the students after seeking advice as to this communication. Several students chose the convenience of email and responded with their answers during the month of May. Each Big Event executive leadership area is assigned two students each year, and I strived to have one representative from each pair as an interviewee. I met this goal with the exception of one pair, yet the quality of my interactions with these two students during weekly meetings and other participant observation informed my understandings of their perspectives.

Interviews are “conversations with a purpose” (Tracy, 2013, p. 138). Depending on the purpose, interviews should be prepared and organized in different ways. Interviews are valuable for discovery and reflection between the researcher and the participant. Interviewing for qualitative research requires various steps to reach completion, and each kind of interview includes various opportunities to yield meaningful data. The use of participant observation and interviewing is strongly interrelated and directed how/whom I interviewed and when/where I observed. My time spent as a participant-observer was vital to my own understandings and experience as a researcher. As a participant-observer, I enjoyed the opportunity to engage in dialogue and conversation with student executives regarding their roles, identification, and sense of responsibility with the organization.

During my research, I interviewed key student leaders of The Big Event to obtain foundational information of the subject. I used a semi-structured, in-depth design

with in-person interviews to explore and investigate the experiences, knowledge, and skills of these student leaders and participants. During these interviews, I gained understanding about the seemingly powerful word-of-mouth, shared experience aspect of recruitment for the service event (Tracy, 2013).

According to many Communication scholars, qualitative interviewing is an embodied emotional performance (Ezzy, 2010). Because emotions are central to the process of interviews, I had to be aware of my own emotions in the context of interviewing. I consistently challenged myself to embrace my emotions with balance and appropriateness for the research scene. During participant observation, I often recorded my emotions during note taking. Many researchers have offered important perspectives regarding the embodied performance aspects of interpretive research (La Pastina, 2006; Oikarinen-Jabai, 2003; Richardson, 1997; Stephens & Delamont, 2006; Wesely, 2006).

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is the collection and study of written documents to explore and identify themes related to the research topic (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011). Qualitative researchers engage in textual analysis in various ways. Written texts include archival documents, organizational or promotional materials, and other forms of recordkeeping and formal documentation.

In this dissertation study, I completed an exploratory search of archival documents, including old copies of *The Battalion* and *The Eagle*. I also collected recent copies of these newspapers based on their coverage of The Big Event. I kept a running log of the pertinent information to include in my findings. Most of the headlines and

articles informed my next steps regarding the research pattern and eventual conclusions. Overall, textual analysis proved to direct my research path yet did not suggest strong implications for my overall research findings. Rather, the process served as an excellent guide to orient my research progression for this study.

I was also granted access to vast data collected since the initial creation of The Big Event. The access was approved by the Director of the Leadership and Service Center. I studied these documents, videos, and other records to examine the laden stories and threads of narrative evident in these various media forms. Photos, news articles, online materials, and other valuable documents were available for my review.

Narrative Analysis

As stated in Chapter I, researchers seek to understand meaning and how populations make sense of their experiences and roles in the world. As an example, the study of narratives will allow for an in-depth analysis of larger structures influencing decisions and actions. “The call of narrative is the inspiration to find language that is adequate to the obscurity and darkness of experience” (Bochner, 2000, p. 266). More specifically, the utility of self-narrative allows researchers to extract meaning from experience rather than exactly how it is lived. Narrative is an incredibly powerful way by which to make and attach meaning in language.

Through understanding and applying the two main approaches to narrative theory, self-narrative and narrative persuasion, this study explains how both can be utilized and further understood within the context of a service organization. I first relied upon Gergen and Gergen’s (1983) work explaining self-narrative. By relying on this

theory, I found ways to explain how sharing narratives promotes personal self-discovery and understanding. I then considered the fundamentals of Fisher's narrative paradigm to support the use of storytelling as a way to persuasively create meaning and interest in stakeholders. I acknowledged the limitations of Fisher's work, and I used the foundational aspects to ground my study. Fisher asserted the importance of good arguments and narration. According to him, stories are the most powerful way to reach an audience.

My research project illuminated narratives regarding The Big Event. I sought to include multiple voices and engage participants in this unfolding story. I considered the use of narrative coherence and fidelity to further understand if and how students construct The Big Event, and selfless service in general, as important and integral to their identity as an Aggie student (Fisher, 1987).

Specifically, I investigated potentially disempowering narratives regarding student participation in The Big Event. To further explain this, I looked for ways by which the discourse excluded or marginalized participation. I identified ways in which the narrative may not be working as intended. I provided a space for critique and reflection regarding how the dominant story of The Big Event is shared and built upon for future generations of Aggies.

I sought to represent all participant voices as I wrote and made sense of my research findings. While doing this, I used thick description balanced with interpretation to facilitate deep understandings of the data (Tracy, 2013). By incorporating the use of first-person voice, brief and extended narratives, and other specific, unique parts of the

data, I aspired to provide an eloquent and coherent piece of scholarship while contributing to the field of Communication research. Ultimately, I hope my research will inform key stakeholders of future opportunities to promote and increase this service event in the future while also linking the importance of service-learning in Communication classrooms. My goals for this dissertation were to set forth a study that enriches our understanding of community service in university contexts while highlighting the critical use and inclusion of communicative techniques and theories.

I observed the everyday responsibilities and actions of The Big Event leadership team to illuminate meaningful and significant representations of my collected data. It was my hope to expose the lived everyday experiences of these Big Event student leaders through the use of visual analysis.

Visual Analysis

In this dissertation study, I engaged in visual analysis to cultivate meaningful conclusions. I used a sample of photos from The Big Event archival file at Cushing Memorial Library and Archives. Additionally, I collected a representative sample of recent photos from social media hashtags (specifically Instagram and Twitter). By analyzing the provided photos in the university archives, I sought to understand how The Big Event was represented in comparison to current photos of the 2014 event. I aimed to situate the importance of these photos to suggest meaningful implications regarding how we use photography to represent lived experiences. Specific findings are shared in Chapter III, and a discussion of these results is presented in Chapter IV.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Photographs “alter and enlarge our notions of what is worthy and what we have a right to observe, and we appropriate the subject that is captured” (Sontag, 1977, p.1). Photographs furnish evidence to make meaning. A photo “may distort, but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what is in the picture” (p. 5). This form of visual representation creates meaning and purpose just as drawings and paintings do. I chose to include photos as another form of expression. By allowing the photos to speak for themselves accordingly, I sought to add another layer of sophistication to my findings and implications. By sharing a pictorial representation of The Big Event, I hoped readers would transport themselves into the scene as detailed in the text they read. I ultimately included photos to appeal to the visual component of narrative understanding and clarity. Furthermore, picture taking has evolved into a convenient action that is user-friendly and embraced by many. By using photos to engage in visual analysis, there is a unique opportunity to understand historical moments and make meaning from these contexts (Jones Barbour, 2011; Yamasaki, 2010).

As part of my data collection process, I investigated The Big Event’s large archival file. In this collection, I found many newspaper articles and photos representing former Big Event details. The collection of materials at Cushing Library was fairly extensive considering the date of the event’s creation. I spent approximately six hours investigating these materials. My final random sample included thirteen photos from the university archives.

After collecting the photos, I created a spreadsheet to organize my themes according to content analysis. Content analysis is based on “counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analyzing those frequencies” (Rose, 2011, p. 62). After I coded the images according to categories, I analyzed the results for meaningful implications. As I devised my categories for coding, I sought to create an exhaustive, exclusive, and enlightening list of codes (Rose, 2011). Content analysis provides a useful way to interpret the cultural meaning of images (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

I also collected a random sample of photos from Twitter to include pictorial representations of the 2014 Big Event. These photos were collected to serve as a point of comparison with the archived photos. These photos were captured within two weeks after The Big Event 2014 concluded. I used the #SelflessService, #TheBigEventTAMU, #TheBigEvent, #TBE, and #OneBigThanks hashtags to retrieve these images. Several photos were posted with small captions narrating the scenes. A detailed discussion of these findings is shared in Chapter III. Specifically, I used these techniques of visual analysis to ask if these photos connect the intended values promoted through The Big Event. In the following, I explain the foundational underpinnings of interpretive research.

Foundations of Interpretive Research: The What and Why of The Big Event

Specifically, interpretive research encompasses many distinct goals, questions, methods, writing styles, roles for the researcher, vocabularies, and criteria (Ellingson, 2009). On the qualitative continuum (ranging from extreme interpretivism to post

positivism)—as proposed by Ellingson (2009)—the middle-ground approach, otherwise known as interpretive research, constructs situated knowledges, provides thick description and deep understandings, and generates pragmatic implications for practitioners. This middle-ground approach on the qualitative continuum seeks to understand how the researcher and participants co-construct their world while focusing on meaningful implications. It is important to understand that interpretive research is messy and fluid, and there is no one fixed way by which to engage in a qualitative study. The researcher’s interests and bias guide this type of work and provide details for the reader to evaluate credibility while allowing opportunities for other researchers to do similar studies. Finally, interpretive research requires self-reflexivity from the researcher. Self-reflexivity, as defined by Tracy (2013), refers to the “careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers’ interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene” (p. 2).

Qualitative research offers a plan by which to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are bound not by tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, yet rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation. Ultimately, researchers seek to provide a holistic account of the research scene. This step seeks answers and generates data to inform future actions.

Coding

After conducting interviews with the participants, I typed a sample of the transcripts into a Word document. I also paid for transcription services for the longer interviews. I then coded each transcript to answer my research questions. I used the constant comparison method to code my data accordingly (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), the constant comparison method requires researchers to break down the data into specific units for coding. I chose this method of analysis because it is a widely accepted way to code qualitative data. I then sorted my data into themes using open coding. As I read the interview transcriptions, I employed axial coding to further define my coding scheme in relation to the others (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). My coding scheme reflected clear terms related to my research questions. I also recorded mini reflection summaries to guide my organization and thought processes.

The themes within the transcripts served as the units of analysis. The cognitive schema, or theme, can be used to understand ideas and relationships (Owen, 1984). Themes were identified based on Owen's three criteria including recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence involves the repetition of general ideas even when the same words are not used, repetition occurs when words or phrases are stated multiple times, and forcefulness includes the volume, pitch, inflection, and pauses evident in the interview responses.

To increase the credibility, transferability, and consistency of my findings, I kept personal journals to note my reactions and thoughts during the observation process

(Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Reflexive journals serve a variety of research purposes, and I used it as a way to track and consider my understandings of the data I was generating. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), a reflexive journal serves as an audit trail for data analysis, thus creating transferability in future contexts while also acting as a vessel for my own self-reflexivity.

Philosophical Assumptions of Interpretive Research

In the following, I review the epistemological, ontological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodical assumptions underpinning qualitative research. I begin with the epistemological foundations inherent in qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers have an important opportunity to make scholarly contributions that reflect personal understanding of epistemological issues. The approaches and understandings of the nature of epistemology ask “What is the relationship between the researcher and the researched?” Epistemology, defined as “a theory of knowledge that involves the examination of justifying beliefs concerning what counts as knowledge or evidence,” prompts the researcher to lessen the distance between self and that being researched (Harding, 1987, p. 1). Other scholars refer to this “as ways of knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, & Tarule, 1986; Potter, 1996).

Ontology, the nature of reality, situates reality as subjective and multiple, as viewed by participants in the research study. Researchers use quotes and themes in the words of participants and provide evidence of different perspectives (Cresswell, 2007; Gonzalez; 2000). Ontological beliefs are often only implicit in research studies, but they “form an important code by which Communication researchers assert their work — and

evaluate the work of others— as exemplars of a particular philosophical tradition” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 5).

The rhetorical assumption in qualitative research accounts for the language of research, or how the researcher writes in a literary informal style using personal voice, qualitative terms, and limited definitions. An implication for practice includes the researcher using an engaging style of narrative while employing the language of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

The methodical assumptions in qualitative research include the process and how the researcher uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and provides an emerging design. Specifically, the researcher works with the details before making generalizations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field.

Axiology, or the role of values, is a powerful aspect of qualitative research. Characteristics of axiology include the researcher acknowledging that research is value-laden with bias. Specifically, the use of *phronesis* is “concerned with contextual knowledge that is interactively constructed, action oriented, and imbued with certain values” (Tracy, 2013, p. 4). This ‘practical wisdom’ becomes a product of the values at play within a given context. Qualitative research that is completed under this guidance serves “to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 140). This assumes the researcher demonstrates a self-reflexive subject position. Most

qualitative method questions are well suited for exploring these phronetic questions concerning morality and values (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative researchers seek to openly discuss values that shape the narrative and include their own interpretations as well as those of the participants in their research practices (Cresswell, 2007). With the researcher as the instrument, the role of values will shape and manifest itself during the research process.

Ethics

Ethical considerations are at the forefront of qualitative research. As an interpretive scholar, I accept the responsibility of making ethical decisions while conducting my personal research. I strive to maintain the utmost integrity during each phase of any given research project, and I seek to promote ethical choice points for others to observe and to follow as well. Specifically, I was most concerned about protecting the identity of the participants represented in the study. I coded the findings and kept any identifying information confidential.

While planning and negotiating access to the research scene, ethical decisions are involved. As Clark and Sharf (2006) suggest, researchers assume various ethical dilemmas in “researching the personal.” Researchers must be prepared to fully disclose their intentions and should strive for transparency with their participants during the process. This includes protecting the confidentiality and privacy of all involved. Qualitative research is confidential yet not anonymous, and informed consent is an ongoing process during the project. Regarding confidentiality, student voices were

carefully coded to protect the identity of the participants. Yet, because of their distinct affiliations with the organization, anonymous results are not purely attainable.

Procedural and relational ethics both involve the important dimension of good decision making and the careful oversight of human interactions. Beyond the basic display of ethics that should be used in common qualitative research practices, relational ethics will be more sensitive and personal. Relational ethics will require researchers “to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences” (Ellis, 2007, p. 3). By connecting Ellis’ definition of relational ethics, I recognize my interests and devotion to the topic of service so as to acknowledge the sometimes challenging nature of not romanticizing my topic as more positive than it really is. I guarded against this by remaining objective to my subject matter. I looked for representations of both positive and negative aspects in the research scene. Through experiencing more research opportunities, I gain a greater understanding of my intended identity as a researcher and am reminded to pursue the highest form of integrity during this unfolding process. Furthermore, relational ethics will prompt the researcher to make crucial decisions regarding the disclosure of sometimes personal information. At times, this information has the potential to be a hindrance to the research scene (La Pastina, 2006).

The co-creation of meaning between the researcher and the participants is foundational to the understandings rooted in interpretive methods. It is important to acknowledge the researcher as the instrument by which the work is conducted. All interpretive scholars should engage in the practice of self-reflexivity to carefully

consider the ways by which their own past experiences, values, perspectives, and interactions shape their lens of the research scene (Cunliffe, 2004; Tracy, 2013). Each researcher has a unique perspective that informs choices and the way by which the world is viewed, as defined with *verstehen*, the necessary ingredient of understanding. This cannot be separated from the researcher, and must be constantly remembered during the study's process.

Before entering a scene, fieldworkers should be reflexive about their own personal identities. The process of self-reflexivity prompts researchers to ask themselves questions related to demographics (including age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) and social attributes (including religion, social class, education level, fitness level, and appearance) (Tracy, 2013). It is important to consider how these attributes shape the identity of the researcher.

Conclusion to Chapter II: My Identity as a Researcher

As a new graduate student at Texas A&M University in Fall 2011, I quickly realized that I was at an institution steeped in a strong tradition of service and leadership values. Through my encounters in class and extracurricular involvement, I became connected with Student Affairs professionals in the Leadership and Service Center. After serving as an intern in Summer 2012, I quickly realized The Big Event could become a case study for my interest in community/university engagement through a Communication perspective. After much thought and planning, this research project was inspired.

As I reflect on my identity as a scholar, I am reminded of Mark Twain's important reminder to "never let schooling get in the way of education." For example, I believe in the importance of cultivating good citizens in the classroom beyond traditional academic expectations to develop Communication competency in students. I aspire to be a tenure track professor with an emphasis in applied Communication theory while conducting research focused on the function and usage of organizational rhetoric as it relates to civic engagement initiatives and practices. I intend to pursue the importance of civic dialogue and its role in the development and sustainability of culture. I also hope to engage in the intersection of leadership and social change theory and practices. I believe in the importance of promoting citizenship practices and theory for practical application, especially in higher education.

My past and present academic endeavors have molded me into the person, teacher, and scholar I am today. Through my extracurricular involvement at the University of Alabama and my graduate assistantship in the Office of Campus Life at Wake Forest University, I was able to incorporate my passions into my scholarship. Now, at Texas A&M, I continue to build on my academic and personal interests to direct and root my scholarship.

Furthermore, I believe in the powerful potential of teaching undergraduate foundational Communication skills. By serving as the COMM 203: Public Speaking Assistant Course Director in the 2013-2014 academic year, I had the exciting opportunity to instruct and facilitate training for our current instructors, who will in turn be teaching and shaping hundreds of Texas A&M's undergraduates through the basic

course. I view the classroom as a place to teach fundamental skills, including public speaking, deliberation techniques, and conflict management, so students will be best prepared for the “real world” post-college. I strongly believe that college instructors must use their stories, including their values, background, and reflections of successes and failures, so as to powerfully engage and connect their students. I have found that students want to hear stories. They ask for stories and then offer their own in turn. When I make class concepts “alive” through my personal stories and the stories of others, meaningful connections form and grow. I believe one of my strongest abilities and responsibilities as a teacher is to tell a story and make it important, real, worthwhile, and connected to class content.

In the classroom, I believe students should be comfortable to participate and challenged to learn. By creating an atmosphere of constructive tension, they push their personal boundaries and learn while doing so. Storytelling and sharing perspectives can certainly facilitate these opportunities. Students learn differences and are challenged in their own identities during the college experience, and that is exactly the way it should be. As a scholar and practitioner, I believe in the importance of personal identity as it relates to citizenship and the contribution of individual efforts to collectively influence the larger world in a positive way. I believe these theories can be implemented to bring about positive change both in academic scholarship and in practice, too. I identify with this “call to action” to be a responsible and developed citizen, and my past experiences have sparked my interest in this research topic.

During my undergraduate and graduate work, I have attended and presented at various conferences related to the intersection of civic engagement, leadership, and citizenship development. I have also been a member of several student organizations focused on leadership development and citizenship studies. I have advised student volunteer and leadership groups, and I believe it is imperative for students to feel empowered to find their own identity through rich discussion and relevant assignments while engaging in meaningful field experiences beyond the classroom. I believe in the value of teaching important issues to promote historical knowledge, progress, and sustainable change. Each student offers a unique story and background, and I believe in the power of personal narrative and advocacy to facilitate change. To me, these themes overlap in Communication scholarship and promote civic dialogue, the role of citizenship, the public sphere, and other similar areas of research.

As a part rhetorician-turned-organizational Communication scholar, I cannot help but rely on rhetorical theory to position my understanding of service discourse at Texas A&M. Specifically, my study of The Big Event is to uncover the institutional story and grand narrative of selfless service. I strive for my academic endeavors to have significant implications and specific uses to positively contribute to our society and to promote the greater good. The rising importance of a global education will be an increasing challenge to address in the years to come, and I am committed to working alongside other scholars and practitioners to find helpful solutions.

My identity as a qualitative researcher allows me to conduct a meaningful study with practical implications for future action. I seek to construct situated knowledges

laden with specific understandings related to my research scenes, and I value the use of participant action to co-construct reality. I especially enjoy the use of emergent research techniques to uncover meaning with the use of flexible criteria and my own self-reflexivity (Tracy, 2013).

I plan to utilize my passion for narrative inquiry in a way that constructively underpins theoretical understandings in the Communication discipline. I am a Communication scholar who identifies with the powerful potential of narrative inquiry through employing interpretive methods, and I seek to use a variety of techniques in my study to energize and produce exciting and rich results. In Chapter III, I demonstrate my findings after conducting interviews and visual analysis of the research artifacts.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

But in reality The Big Event in a way after college should become kind of a mindset in the lifestyle and you start doing The Big Event almost daily because you understand it's so important to serve those around you. And I think why The Big Event started and why it exists is because, I mean, it really is to serve people around you and that's why it's had so much success on campus. It's not just about promoting a cause or something like that. It's about meeting the deepest needs of an individual and developing those relationships with them and understanding where they're coming from.

-Student Interview

Research Question One

Research question one asked how the student leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M. Coding and analysis of interview data revealed the emergence of four dominant themes to answer this question. These themes include personal leadership development, individual leadership philosophy, service-mindedness, and the role of Texas A&M traditions.

Students shared narratives that illuminated how personal experiences constructed and/or changed their identities (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). Their stories also reflected skills they learned while enacting these identities. Notably, they also highlighted how this call to service was something bigger than their individual contributions. Specifically,

these comments highlight linkages between The Big Event's mission and purpose while also connecting Texas A&M's institutional core values. I first discuss the personal leadership development shared by the students. I then explain and further detail the emergence of an individual leadership philosophy, service-mindedness, and the role of Texas A&M traditions. Figures 1-13 highlight previous acts of service completed during The Big Event through the years.

Personal Leadership Development

“Leading By Example”

The first type of personal leadership development that emerged was insight related to the value of extracurricular involvement. As one student explained, the leaders learned applications of leadership through The Big Event in addition to traditional classroom teaching. This sentiment was echoed by many and is exemplified by the following:

It will and already has impacted my time here at A&M and my life. This has been and most likely will be the best year of college I have had. Though the job was rigorous at times I would not trade the memories, relationships, or character qualities I gained through this year for anything. This year taught me more than just what the classroom can teach me. I learned about self-discipline, time management, how to accomplish goals and also how to manage people and lead them which will definitely help me after my time here is done.



Figure 1. Students painting a house for local citizens

In multiple interviews, students articulated the deep meaning of learning through self-discipline, time management, goal setting, and leading other people. While learning to translate the importance of selfless service and teaching it to others, students were also changed by the relationships they formed with fellow leaders. One student executive offered:

I believe The Big Event has impacted my life the most by the relationships that I formed through it and what I have learned about myself. It has also taught me how to work hard and deal with a lot of things that I can apply later on in life in a business setting. The relationships I have made with the other eleven people working on this with me will last forever and I will never forget some of the memories that we made together this past year.

Students often spoke of the transferrable life lessons laden in their Big Event experiences with helping people while having empathy for their needs. They experienced the satisfaction of completing tasks that made a difference in the community, and their experiences with teamwork and collaboration challenged them greatly. The leadership executives are also high-achieving students focused on personal improvement linked to their future careers. Students also commented on the unique memories they created during their involvement with serving people. Examples included the sincere appreciation expressed by residents and the ultimate satisfaction of a job well done. According to them, these memories connected and amplified their individual contributions through the organization.



Figure 2. Aggies washing a police car during The Big Event

“Love is a Verb.”

The Big Event student Co-Director selects a book each year to guide the leaders' decision-making and personal development. In Spring 2014, students read *The Servant* by James C. Hunter. Each week, students discussed the assigned readings for insight and reflection. In the interviews, I asked students to highlight their understandings of the book and its applicability to The Big Event. It is important to understand that much of the nonfiction book is rooted in Christian principles and beliefs. These undertones, and in some cases overtones, framed the responses offered by the students:

I base my leadership on the standard “servant leadership” that we talked about all year. I truly think that the only way you can lead someone is to love them entirely, and to show them that you would do anything to make them and their duties better. Also, loving people is always more beneficial than loving the organization so that must be the pillar that holds everyone together.



Figure 3. Local citizens and students sharing a meal together

Interestingly, another student offered similar feedback:

Love is a verb. From reading this book I have learned that love is not only an emotion that you feel but also an action you can take. We are not all inclined to love everyone we meet or enjoy every task we do. What we can do is serve through the idea that love can be shown to anyone through actions.

By emphasizing the importance of leadership, The Big Event's mission is enacted and perpetuated. Through the generations, these current student leaders are the teachers of this perpetual mentality and belief system. Another student offered:

I have learned though I love the Big Event, and that it is what originally made me apply to be an executive, I am most invested in the organization for the people and their development as leaders. I know that I would not be able to work for The Big Event as I did without the amazing people that are on staff, committee, and exec [executive officers].



Figure 4. Former Big Event leadership team posing for group picture

The students, both in weekly meetings and in interviews, reflected on personal desires to improve and strengthen their own leadership abilities. Although the students appeared confident in their abilities, they were quick to highlight the need for personal learning through future growth and understanding. For example, one student detailed:

I have learned there are many areas in my leadership style that I need to improve on. I have learned that serving is not the easiest task, but it is the best one.

Another student offered:

I think the thing that has resonated with me the most is to not be close-minded.

In the book [The Servant} he is so shut off to getting help at all and in the end it turns out to be the best thing that has ever happened. I think it really shows me to be open-minded to everything and listen to everyone's opinions as well.

By placing this “call to serve” above other priorities, The Big Event student leaders emphasized the importance of simply learning to help those in need. By valuing this above all, students position themselves to learn from each experience as long as it is rooted in selfless service to others. Students also focused on their individual growth to promote the organization’s strengths as a whole. In short, the students largely credited their own skills and character development to The Big Event.

To create effective and meaningful work, students were often reminded during the semester to set obtainable, yet challenging, goals. Some goals were set for personal reasons, and others were defined for team-building and growth. One student highlighted the importance of goal setting and achieving tasks together as a team. For most students, this was more implied than explicitly stated. Regardless, one student expressed:

The Big Event has shown me what it is like to lead others toward a common goal.

Some of the tasks that we have to do can seem meaningless but in the end prove to be important.

As exemplified here, students learned leadership through this version of experiential education. By setting common organizational goals similar to the one expressed by the above student, participants unite around the identification of shared objectives. Although

at the time assignments may have seemed meaningless and remedial, students later realized they were learning future professional development skills in those moments. As student leaders matured during their leadership experiences, and in this case, as I interviewed The Big Event executive staff, students consistently emphasized the extracurricular training they have received through involvement in The Big Event. For some, these experiences forced them to go beyond their comfort zones and lead in ways they did not know they could.

Finally, the meaningful interactions afforded to students through The Big Event involvement are highlighted in the quote below. Here, we see the identification students find through interacting with like-minded individuals toward a common goal and purpose. For many, forging a network of friendships is one by-product of their involvement with The Big Event. As one student stated:

The Big Event has impacted me the most through those who serve on The Big Event Executive team and committee. I have been shown more love, respect, and appreciation through this team than I have in my entire life. I always know that I am being supported through anything that I go through. It has impacted me in the way I interact with others. Everyone on this team is outgoing, friendly, and servant-hearted. I have learned from so many others how to possess these traits and carry them to every area of my life. I live my life completely different now than when I attended my first meeting and that is because of the people in this organization who give so much to show kindness to everyone.



Figure 5. Female Greek student assisting during The Big Event

This understanding of love and respect for others is especially notable. The enthusiasm and admiration for each other are consistently evident in the sentiments of these students. Not only are the students focused on meeting the needs of those in the Bryan/College Station community, they are also focused on meeting the needs of each other as members of the executive leadership team. Their willingness to help one another, enthusiasm for their assignments, and overall excitement for the organizational mission seemed to create a sense of belonging for each member of the leadership team. Their flexibility and adaptability as student leaders are exemplified through the concern they enact for one another.



Figure 6. Former Big Event leadership team smiling for the camera

Individual Leadership Philosophy

"From the outside looking in you can't understand it, and from the inside looking out you can't explain it."

The second main theme for discussion is the students' creation of an individual leadership philosophy. In these interviews, students were prompted to reflect on their understandings of leadership and how they view themselves. By participating in The Big Event, students often credited their experiences as a way to enhance their leadership abilities. One student stated:

I define leadership as someone who is going to get their hands dirty with the people they are leading and leading by example. This is someone who is a step ahead of everyone in terms of planning and someone who is always prepared for

anything. Everyone I have looked up to as a leader has always been the hardest working individual on the team and led by example.



Figure 7. Volunteers completing a project in local neighborhood

The students' reflections exemplify how the core values of the school are aligned through extracurricular activities such as The Big Event. Student leaders are enacting the core values as a necessary means by which to enhance their overall Aggie experience. Another student leader echoed these sentiments:

Like I said earlier, I like to lead by example and think some of the best leaders do it this way. Being on top of everything is always crucial to me because if you

do not have the answers then no one does. It sets a good example for the followers and you set a bar for others to reach.

During planning meetings in the spring, students constantly mentioned the importance of leading by example and working closely together with their committees and sub-committees. By learning to lead while leading others, these student leaders were aware of their influence during the planning and implementation stages of the event. Consistent guidelines in alignment with the mission (via email, texts, and weekly group meetings) were issued to student leaders to remind them about the importance of humility, teamwork, respect, and leadership training. These ideals strongly complement and reaffirm the core values of leadership and service directed by the University.

Specifically, some student leaders articulated the importance of strong organization and motivation while leading. With such a large organization that has so many “moving parts,” student leaders must find some pattern of consistency from year to year. Although the current organizational structures allow for flexibility and adaptability from year to year, student executives operate within a heavily prescribed “tried and true” system. I observed the transition between officers and the utilization of extremely organized record keeping to guide the changes and responsibility. To make the transition easier, student executives were encouraged to keep in touch with previous leaders who held their positions. Because of this, students are positioned to succeed based on the collaboration they have with previous executives. As one student stated:

I define leadership as taking responsibility in organizing and motivating individuals while always working alongside them to make the team the best that it may be.



Figure 8. Aggies shoveling in a resident's garden

This sense of teamwork is highly important. As students prepared for the day of The Big Event, the executive leadership team constantly enacted “we” language instead of “I”

language. As volunteers in the organization, students are taught to place another person's needs before their own. This sense of selfless service is cultivated from the start, and this intention connects students with meaningful opportunities, both as a mentor and novice. For many students, selfless service is empowering and transformative. As one student said:

Leadership is the ability to empower others to give their best in order to strive toward a common goal. Effective leaders believe in whom they are leading and give them encouragement along the way. Leaders do not consider themselves above anyone, but understand the position they hold and utilize it for the betterment of everyone.

And another student articulated:

My leadership philosophy is simple. Passionate leaders make passionate leaders. What I have learned in The Big Event is those who have a passion for what they do are always looking for others to share that same passion. Leaders who are passionate are friendly toward those they encounter and they want what is best in the area they are leading. I have learned that my passion for The Big Event has shown through and others have become passionate about what I am passionate about because they see the joy that it brings me. Serving with someone who is always striving toward a goal with a good attitude, causes others to do the same.

For some, seemingly sensational words like "passion" are considered negatively. Many people want to formalize service and reflections and contain these ideals in certain silos.

By doing so, we fail to see the transformative nature that service and leadership experiences actually have on students during their extracurricular involvement. As the interviewees stated, students identify passion for the service work they engage in through The Big Event. This passion is evident at all levels of interactions with volunteers, committees, and fellow executive leadership team members. I discuss the next theme of service-mindedness, a prevalent theme found during my interviewing process.

Service-Mindedness

“Meets Them Where They Are”

One cannot speak of The Big Event without mentioning and understanding service. What service is, whom it impacts, and how it changes lives will be the essence of why The Big Event exists. In reference to research question one, I asked students what service means to them. They were ready to answer because this question is often asked of them as Big Event leaders. One student stated:

Service is doing something for someone without expecting anything in return regardless of who they are.

Here, we see the student imply the enactment of selfless service as a necessary component of why The Big Event exists. By disregarding their individual needs, this student emphasizes meeting another person’s needs, just because. For many, service is an extension of this idea. For example, one student said:

Service is the act of giving something without expecting anything in return. Serving is an act of kindness through words or actions. Those who display

service are motivated to help anyone around them with little regard for their own personal needs.

And:

I define service as anything that makes you go outside of your comfort zone in order to make a person, team, or situation better through a selfless act.

The institutional core value of selfless service resonates among student leaders.

Ultimately, students emphasized this means serving beyond an individual's comfort zone.

The students' motivation to serve is another important facet of this discussion. I asked students why they were compelled to become involved with The Big Event in the first place. Many answers were offered, yet the themes of each one were quite similar.

One student explained:

What motivates me to serve through The Big Event are the responses we hear from not only the residents but the world around us who take notice of this awesome project. The Big Event has changed the way people look at our society and it shows that not everyone in this world is just out to take care of themselves.

As Aggies, we have been given this opportunity to give back just a little bit of our time to show those around us that it really does make a difference to help those out around you.

This student highlights the institution's mission and core values as one of the most important reasons to get involved and give back to the local community. During the semester, other students echoed these sentiments and framed their decisions as a responsibility to uphold as an Aggie. The students take pride and satisfaction with their

opportunities to advance The Big Event to new heights. Since its creation, student leaders serving through The Big Event have been conscientious to utilize and further develop the leadership traits of participants. Furthermore, according to a Big Event student leader:

The Big Event has been an environment that is consciously and constantly looking to develop everyone of the members through finding their strengths and finding ways that they can lead. When every member is seen as an individual leader and as an integral part of the group, the organization as a whole can only get better. The Big Event is unlike any other organization because it only seeks to build up individuals, and the residents are directly affected by the positive environment that everyone sets. Also, the fact that The Big Event unites the entire community with the college students is unlike any other.



Figure 9. Former Big Event kickoff rally encouraging students to say “thank you” to local residents

Here, the student is articulating an ideal form of teamwork, collaboration, and leadership. By modeling the way and respecting each team member's presence, time, and skills, The Big Event student leadership seeks to value each volunteer who is assisting. By encouraging each participant's personal skill building, The Big Event is perpetuated from year to year through intentional and effective leadership.

For some students, The Big Event's size and structure are very intimidating, especially in the beginning. Students can be hesitant to join the organization because of this, and student leaders voiced their same feelings. They also shared the positive rewards of taking opportunities to learn and serve through such a large organization. For example, one student commented:

When I first began on The Big Event, I was intimidated by all of the students that it took to run such a large event. However, when I showed up to my first meeting, everyone I met was friendly and excited to meet me. I have found The Big Event to be a place of encouragement and love where anyone can get involved and feel at home. As a student who knows how it feels to sometimes be alone, I know how important it is to surround yourself with those who care about you. The Big Event is a place where each student can feel appreciated. Everyone inside of The Big Event cares for others and works hard without complaining to serve those whom they don't even know. I am motivated because of those around me who push me to be the best person I can be. I was motivated to serve my three years on The Big Event because it was a place where I was appreciated and respected for who I am, and I was continually pushed to be the best person I can be.

Sub-themes of appreciation, connectedness, the importance of a good attitude, and respect emerged through the use of continued interview questions. Students often reflected on their personal experiences of acceptance through involvement with The Big Event. Not only were students allowed to bond and forge friendships with like-minded people, they were also given the opportunity to further develop their personal identities. These experiences allowed students to identify with the organizational mission of The Big Event while situating their contributions to the larger framework of traditions at Texas A&M. Next, I highlight The Big Event's perceived role of traditions revealed during the interview process.

Role of Texas A&M Traditions

An Honor and a Privilege

At Texas A&M, the overwhelming presence of traditions is certainly evident. From the beloved traditions of The Twelfth Man, the Corps of Cadets, Muster, and Silver Taps, The Big Event has certainly become a hallmark event each year. The substance of The Big Event is at the heart of why so many students are dedicated. To begin, one student explained:

The Big Event exists because it is the shining spirit of what being an Aggie is all about. It is a tradition that extends the helping hand to the residents unlike any other college campus has seen, and it exists because being a student at Texas A&M is different than any other school in the world. We are a part of something very big here at this university and we are showing others how special this campus truly is.

A common perception of Aggies is to boast and position the school as unique, special, and without equal. Here, students begin to articulate the importance of traditions and how important they are to the continued success of the organization:

Tradition is a HUGE part of The Big Event and how students participate. It is just like any other tradition and since we are a school founded on tradition, that is why students put such an emphasis on being involved on campus and making sure they are serving in The Big Event every year. We as a student body believe that showing the value of selfless service is a vital role to being an Aggie and that is why the idea of tradition has helped The Big Event out so much.

Another student offered:

Tradition definitely does play a role in maintaining the positive atmosphere that comes with working with The Big Event. The culture of The Big Event is to never ever talk poorly about anyone, and I think that allows our organization to continually grow in a positive way. Also, it motivates people for their work when they know people believe in and love them.

Students also spoke of the unity the event creates. For example:

The Big Event exists to unify strangers together and say thank you for being who you are. It started by the students wanting to say thank you to residents of Bryan and College Station for putting up with college kids nine months out of the year. I believe now The Big Event exists to spread love to everyone it can through the act of selfless service. The Big Event can connect people in the strangest ways,

and this service gives students the opportunity to meet someone older who may have a completely different story than another person.

Student leaders also cited the importance of institutional core values here as well. For example:

If Texas A&M was not so heavy on traditions, I do not know if it would have lasted. Convincing half of a large University to wake up early on a Saturday and serve someone through manual labor they do not even know is not normal. Students who carry on the tradition of A&M's core values have carried on the tradition of The Big Event. Students here take pride in the idea that we all serve each other here at this University, and they continue to show it through serving in The Big Event.

The student executives cite tradition as a fundamental backbone to the Aggie core value of selfless service. This desire to uphold time-honored traditions allows Aggie history to perpetuate for the generations to come. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2014), a tradition is a way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by people in a particular group for a long time. I now provide content regarding negative feedback surrounding The Big Event through the years.

Negative Feedback

"It's Not About Who Can or Cannot Afford It."

Since The Big Event's creation in 1982, multiple voices of criticism have been shared with the student leadership and volunteers. Specifically, The Big Event is often criticized for not focusing on citizens with strict socioeconomic needs. Many believe that

service should only be offered to those in need rather than to wealthier, affluent residents. As one student offers:

Many believe that it is not right to serve someone who may be of a higher class than those who are of less fortunate status. This is ridiculous. At what point do we choose whom to serve? Where is the line between where we draw those who need to be served and those who don't need to be? From what I know about this world, everyone needs help. The Big Event does not just provide shovels, rakes, and window cleaners. The Big Event provides smiles, handshakes, and kind words... Service does not have a price tag.

This student articulated that service cannot be measured in monetary value. Here, many issues of selfless, unconditional service are unraveled. For those who lead The Big Event, service should be offered to anyone in the community regardless of need. By emphasizing and teaching this concept to all student participants, leaders have attempted to expand this understanding to all Aggie students serving through The Big Event.

Other criticisms raise questions of growth in terms of both size and quality. With more than 20,000 Texas A&M students participating in The Big Event, this is an obvious critique. Concerns exist about the overwhelming population growth of students while ensuring the integrity and mission of The Big Event. The size of the student body potentially inhibits the future logistics of the organization. With such a large number of students at Texas A&M, The Big Event student executives must secure more service sites to meet this growing demand. As volunteer numbers expand due to this growth, the organizational mission is threatened. Also, dissenters criticize the student-run nature of

The Big Event. When asked how they defend The Big Event against negative feedback and comments, one student explained:

I defend The Big Event by reinforcing our pillars and what we are truly about. I remind individuals that we are entirely student-run and definitely not perfect. So, we always apologize for our mistakes, but we also remind the complainer that we care about them above all.

Another student executive articulated how leaders defend the organization against criticism:

I defend TBE with our mission statement. All we are trying to do is say thank you to the community and that is it. It confuses me sometimes how people criticize it when they do not truly see how much effort goes into it and how much good it brings to the community. People mainly criticize it for helping out families that are pretty well off financially but I always say that you may not know what's going on in their life. Maybe they have no time to do their yard work, maybe they really needed that because they have several kids to take care of and can't find time, or maybe they are new to the community and want to meet some of the students. It's not about who can or cannot afford it, it is about saying thank you to as many residents as we can whether they are wealthy or not. I always tell people to not judge a house by how nice it is, because The Big Event might be something they have needed all year for multiple reasons.

This student articulates the importance of the overall mission. By asserting the value laden in the mission, student executives position themselves to strongly uphold the organizational standards when criticism is evident.

Another student described the importance of improving communication among student leadership through committees and sub-committees. One student suggested:

I think The Big Event can always improve in communication between subcommittees. There's often a gap in knowledge about who is doing what, and though it isn't necessary to know all of the details, it would be helpful for committee members to know what the exec members know about each individual subco [sub-committee].

Another student added:

The Big Event exists to bring together people in the Bryan/College Station area by simply caring for them. When we show the residents that we want to work for them, we show them that we are not selfish college students, but people who want others to know that we love and appreciate them, even if we don't come in contact with them directly every day.

In summary, the conclusion to research question one highlights how students use narrative to articulate their autobiographies by disclosing issues of identity, skills learned, and a larger sense of purpose through serving. Their accounts vividly tell a story of how their experiences as Big Event executives have shaped and developed their personal identities, and ultimately, their lives. By serving as a Big Event executive, they are developing themselves and are poised for future professional and personal

endeavors. The passion in their responses echoes their identification with the value of selfless service. Their sense of self-fulfillment demonstrates a strong desire to be a responsible Aggie through selfless service. Ultimately, they display the power of making a difference by unifying their efforts for meaningful service. These conclusions shape theoretical and practical implications discussed in Chapters IV and V. I now explain the findings regarding research question two.

Research Question Two

Research question two asked what is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion. Coding and analysis revealed the emergence of themes related to these three areas. Regarding logistics, the theme reported was:

- Best recruitment practices

Questions regarding preparation revealed the need for:

- Valuable, skill-based experiences
- Improved internal relations among student executives, committees, and volunteers

Responses relating to perpetuation included:

- Need for articulating the vision for future planning
- Need for strategic campus planning for national and international growth of The Big Event

Students were asked to share their personal narratives while answering particular interview questions aimed at uncovering how these responses are constructed and

understood by The Big Event student executives. First, I discuss the logistics surrounding The Big Event narrative.

Logistics

The Twelfth Man

As student executives discussed future growth of The Big Event, they emphasized the importance of recruitment. For many years, student executives have been intentional about involving as many Aggies as possible for the event. As student participation continues to grow, The Big Event leadership needs to increase the number of job sites and tasks offered while also maximizing the quality of work done and overall social impact. Students have worked to expand service projects to residents who have previously not been served. In doing so, student executives have strategically worked to bolster their volunteer recruitment efforts. This past year (2013-2014), student executives wanted to recruit at least 20,000 students to participate in The Big Event. On the day of The Big Event, 20,503 Aggies registered to serve. After meeting this lofty goal, student executives were asked about the importance of sustaining and improving recruitment efforts. I asked about the means by which students see the information regarding what The Big Event is, why they should serve, and other logistical information. One student commented:

Our big recruitment is through sign holding on campus and putting them all over freshmen dorms and areas of campus that may have not had a good turnout in past years. This year, social media was a really big target and we had a TON of posts on Facebook constantly for several weeks which really helped as well.



Figure 10. Cadet hanging a sign on campus building

Another student executive highlighted the importance of visual representations of the service event. By promoting the event through photos, students were targeted to reach out and get involved. This student executive also included the importance of word-of-mouth conversations for recruitment purposes. For example:

I think that photos and word of how big the Day Of actually is originally brings in first time volunteers, but when the individuals experience serving the residents, that is truly what keeps them participating.



Figure 11. Aggie student cutting grass for a cause

One student described how a conversation is initiated about service to spark interest in the topic. Here, a student described this experience:

I would ask them about the last time someone had served them. Did they help you study for a test, or pack up your books when they dropped you off for that test? When was the last time someone smiled at you and said “have a nice day,” and it truly made your day better? Everyone around you is serving each other and everyone includes you. Those who serve only serve because someone served

them first. By participating in The Big Event, you can make someone feel the way you feel when someone does something nice for you.



Figure 12. On campus recruiting for a previous Big Event

Preparation

“As Aggies”

Student interviews included the importance of learning from previous Big Events while preparing future operational plans. When organizing plans, the interviewees cited the importance of first understanding how much The Big Event prepares students for future leadership opportunities and other related experiences. As evident in the stories of these student executives representing The Big Event, strong leadership opportunities that

are tied to the organizational commitment to serve people enable positive outcomes through the act of service. For example, one student offered:

The Big Event has truly taught me what it is like to give all that I have to something, while still trying to do well in school and have time for other relationships. It shows me how I will have to juggle so much later in life, and I am grateful for learning early how to balance it all.

Another student discussed the importance of future growth for The Big Event. The student executives embrace this notion and work toward a common goal of future growth and continued sustainability. One student said:

I believe The Big Event can improve by continuing to spread. The Big Event spreads the idea that we are all living here on this earth as one and we should unify together. The Big Event is true selfless service, and if this idea can spread to colleges and even high schools, this world may unify through the act of raking leaves.

Here, students relate the need to grow with the institutional core value of selfless service. Students connect their experiences of success and responsibilities with their overarching understanding of the importance of unification through service.



Figure 13. Student raking in front of local Hospice office

Other students described specific skills they have acquired as a result of service through The Big Event. By identifying their strengths and opportunities for improvement, students are solidifying the importance of service projects to train future servant leaders. For example, one student offered:

My experiences have taught me what it is like to maintain a strong leadership position in instructing others, while balancing the ability to care for the individuals of my committee and staff members. I think that the organizational and workload of the organization can easily carry over into me running my own practice and showing me how to treat my co-workers.

As demonstrated in this quote, students view The Big Event as a training ground by which to learn applicable skills critical for future successful careers. By highlighting the collective stories of students who have participated, The Big Event provides a way for them to gain unique skills through selfless service.

Perpetuation

“Getting Their Hands Dirty”

During my research experience, students consistently balanced their conversations regarding perpetuation in both current and future tenses. For example, students often discussed needs of the 2014 event, and they were often talking about sustaining these ideas for future growth and improvements. One important notion that consistently emerged from participant observation and interviews was the interest to expand The Big Event to as many schools as possible in the country. A strong presence is already visible at over 100 American colleges and universities. I asked student executives who were transitioning out of their roles about future growth strategies. In particular, one student said:

I believe the biggest thing that The Big Event can improve on is internally how we get to know and lead our staff assistants. This is always needing improvement because there are over 220 of them and it is hard to really get to know everybody and develop them into leaders. Our structure was set up differently this year so they could be led by a committee member, but this is one very hard area that could always need improvement.

I also asked students to describe their vision of how The Big Event will look in twenty years. Students were excited to talk about this potential. One student described:

I envision The Big Event to be pretty amazing twenty years from now. What makes the Day Of experience really special for the students is how much vendors and donors get involved. So hopefully within the next twenty years as it grows, more big names really start to get on board with us for a longer amount of time. I will say I am looking forward to see at what point the student participant number dies off at, and I think half of the student body would be incredible within the next three years but I do think there will be a point when it levels out.

Here, students articulated the desire to see more vendors represented at the event.

Students also expressed the desire for increased participation of volunteers in future years. Concerning the number of Aggie students participating, one student detailed:

We have all said that there will eventually be a plateau in the number of students that will participate in The Big Event, but the spreading of the project across the world will hopefully continue to grow. Also, the “One Big Day” idea across the nation can only keep growing until we would need something like a national board one day.

The “One Big Day” idea is an expression often used to describe the vision of one Big Event across the country. This would include one logo and one mission all operating to thank their communities. As detailed below, one student offered a vision for this “One Big Day”:

I believe in twenty years The Big Event will be an annual event for colleges across the country. Over 80 schools already have Big Events, and this number will continue to grow throughout the years. When The Big Event gets a unified logo and date through all of these schools, things will begin to spread all around the country. I believe in the next twenty years, churches and high schools will start implementing Big Events around their communities. The visions and dreams for The Big Event are endless. As long as the heart of The Big Event continues to be about selfless service and not about numbers served, these dreams can become a reality.

Here, this student articulates the hope that many Big Event student executives share.

They want to see selfless service become a hallmark tradition at other institutions as well. As described, these student executives are strongly committed to the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event.

In summary, the conclusion to research question two includes the importance of creating valuable service experiences, promoting the importance of future growth, building personal skill building, and utilizing proper training and recruitment practices while also improving internal relations to expand The Big Event at Texas A&M, nationally, and globally. These concluding results suggest implications for theory and practice discussed in Chapters IV and V.

March 29, 2014: My Personal Narrative

Something Greater Than Myself

During my research process, I spent many hours engaging in participant observation. Figures 14-18 represent my personal account of The Big Event 2014. On the Day Of, I participated in a service project with fellow Communication Graduate Student Association members. I arrived at the parking lot of Reed Arena bright and early to receive our group's information and tools. I also walked around and perused the various vendors and their offerings. The logistics of this morning resulted in a sight to see. The planning and execution of verifying student ID cards, collecting tools, and encouraging the students were all part of a well-crafted, carefully orchestrated event. Although the check-in lines were extremely long, my team eventually worked our way to the sign-in table. Tool distribution lines were especially long as well, and Big Event representatives were positioned throughout the property and were assisting students with questions and concerns. Interestingly, the title of this dissertation was offered by a former Director of The Big Event at this Day Of kickoff event. After the student executives welcomed and rallied the crowd for their service projects, many words of thankfulness were expressed. For example, every speaker referred to the privilege to serve and say "thank you" to local residents as they addressed the thousands of students in attendance. Cheers, applause, and Aggie chants were often heard after speakers concluded their remarks. The rally ended with a collective rendition of the Aggie War Hymn before students were dismissed for their projects.



Figure 14. Morning kickoff rally on Day Of 2014

After we arrived at our service site, the resident we were working for quickly greeted us. This resident was a veteran supporter of The Big Event. She was extremely friendly and excited that we were assisting her. We rearranged her flower beds with new mulch, potted plants, and landscaping trim. As we worked, she described her extreme health problems. She recounted her family's needs. She was very warm and asked us to tell her about ourselves. She even surprised us with homemade lasagna and salad for lunch! Our project took approximately 2 ½ hours to complete. Two Big Event student leaders visited our house to be certain our project was running smoothly. They also ate lunch with us. The resident expressed much appreciation as we all shared personal stories about how much we were enjoying the day. After much conversation, laughing, and enjoying the food, we decided it was time to leave. We took pictures and exchanged

contact information. She again expressed her sincere gratitude for our help, and she gave us big hugs just before we left.

I then returned to Headquarters at the Reed Arena parking lot. There, I observed student executives, leadership committee members, volunteers, and the advisor as they executed their roles. The mobile command center, furnished by the City of Bryan each year, is used to field phone calls from students who are serving.



Figure 15. Mobile command unit provided by the City of Bryan

Calls include giving directions, filing incident report claims, and other issues of this nature. Students are directed to use this service as a central hub for all of their Day Of needs. Incidents were very minimal, and that is always good. Student executives were

found to be calm and collected. Many students were enjoying snacks and Sonic treats provided to them as an encouragement for a strong finish to a successful day.



Figure 16. The Big Event Director's Day Of binder

When the last student group returned their tools to the designated area, the student executives and other committee leaders gathered to debrief about the day. Exhausted yet upbeat, many words of appreciation and awe were shared.



Figure 17. Student executive meeting after The Big Event 2014

After deciding a meeting place for the celebration that night, students were allowed to leave. I took the following photo as I was leaving the area for the day.



Figure 18. Reed Arena parking lot after The Big Event 2014

As I have shared before, I also attended the weekly meetings with the student executives. These meetings were held in the Memorial Student Center each Thursday evening. Students were given detailed agendas to guide their discussions. Each officer took turns updating about their successes, questions, and other information. Each executive position was assigned two people, one male and one female. This arrangement stemmed from traditional pairings of these executive positions through the years. Each week, the Director started the meetings with an inspiring tone. The Director often shared stories of experiences from the previous week. The Director also motivated the officers to lead by

example. The Co-Director then shared perspectives and guided discussion related to *The Servant*. Each person was encouraged to discuss and reflect his or her understandings of the book's content.

The language used to talk to one another was especially notable. Encouragement was reinforced from person to person. The disposition of these students seemed to foster this encouragement naturally. Executive members were often offering their assistance when needed. The environment of support and encouragement was obvious by the conversations they shared. In each meeting, the advisor was also present. The advisor's role was to be a resource for the students when they needed guidance.

The interactions in the weekly meetings provided insight to further understand The Big Event in reference to my research questions. With the photos displayed in this chapter, I engaged in visual analysis to further illuminate understandings based on pictorial evidence of The Big Event since its creation in 1982.

My personal experiences and narrative as a researcher connect and amplify the findings I concluded in this study. It was a very meaningful experience to live this Big Event experience while I sought to further understand what it meant to The Big Event student leaders. Ultimately, this research study further impacted my conclusions because of my lived volunteer experience during The Big Event. My personal volunteer experience affirmed my findings beyond my work as the researcher. In the following, I explain visual analysis and my findings.

Visual Analysis

Archival Photos

The archived photos provided a historical reference to former Big Events. I used the photos to analyze the students' leadership involvement in relation to my research questions. These photos involved a variety of themes, including recruitment, action-oriented service, and group participation. These themes represented strong consistencies with the interview accounts regarding how The Big Event seeks to operate. Essentially all of the photos found in the archives did not ultimately challenge my understandings of procedural tasks associated with the organization. Rather, each photo from past years documented people, places, and actions that pattern very similarly to what I saw in more recent photos. The actions represented in these photos have changed very little through time.

Twitter Posts

Additionally, the recent Twitter photos mostly included group scenes. These photos were interesting because of their collectivist nature. For example, few images included a single person taking action. Rather, photos were shared to show the group formation surrounding their Big Event tasks. For many students, working in groups is important for this day of service. By serving with other students in a group, the individual likely feels more comfortable working in an unknown place. Other previously discussed benefits of group work include the overall power of team cohesion and the ability to get more work done collectively.

Considering Both Pictorial Samples

Both sets of photos represented gendered ideas of roles. For example, one archival photo showed a male completing more labor-intensive jobs. Males and females were seen painting and completing other similar tasks. Diversity of students is represented in both samples of photos as well.

The research questions of this study asked:

- 1) How do the leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M?
- 2) What is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion?

Analysis of interview transcripts and archival photos revealed interesting and worthy theoretical and practical implications which are highlighted in Chapters IV and V. My personal experiences as a volunteer and researcher also allowed me to immerse myself in the scene to make sense of the surroundings. My lived experiences informed my research process as a participant-observer. In the research scene, I often found many overlapping occurrences based on the information provided during interviews and my actual experiences as a Big Event volunteer. The process of visual analysis did not provide major insights for the study, yet each photo confirmed my conclusions based on the interview data. In Chapter IV, I detail the theoretical implications of my findings.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORIES

When I first began on The Big Event, I was intimidated by all of the students that it took to run such a large event. However, when I showed up to my first meeting, everyone I met was friendly and excited to meet me. I have found The Big Event to be a place of encouragement and love where anyone can get involved and feel at home. As a student who knows how it feels to sometimes be alone, I know how important it is to surround yourself with those who care about you. The Big Event is a place where each student can feel appreciated. Everyone inside of The Big Event cares for others and works hard without complaining to serve those whom they don't even know. I am motivated because of those around me who push me to be the best person I can be. I was motivated to serve my three years on The Big Event because it was a place where I was appreciated and respected for who I am, and I was continually pushed to be the best person I can be.

-Student Interview

The purpose of this study was to identify how The Big Event at Texas A&M constructs service and “giving back” as important and necessary to Aggie students. Specifically, I asked two questions: 1) How do the leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M? and 2) What is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion? My analysis

revealed the emergence of multiple themes for each question. Regarding research question one, these themes included 1) personal leadership development, 2) individual leadership philosophy, 3) service-mindedness, and 4) the role of Texas A&M traditions. For research question two, multiple themes were discovered for logistics, preparation, and perpetuation. Regarding logistics, the theme reported was the importance of best recruitment practices. Questions regarding preparation revealed the importance of valuable, skill-based experiences and the need for improved internal relations among student executives, committees, and volunteers. Responses relating to perpetuation included the need for articulating the vision for future expansion and strategic campus planning for national and international growth of The Big Event.

As the third largest student body in the country, Aggie students signify a large group of potential change agents. As the years go by, The Big Event is seeking to grow in both size and quality. As exemplified in the institutional core values previously discussed, Texas A&M students are positioned to contribute to their local communities in large, unified ways of service. One such way is through The Big Event. In the following, I describe a very recent national distinction received by Texas A&M, followed by an explanation of the implications regarding narrative theory, student development theory (specifically Servant Leadership), and Generational Theory.

Recent National Distinction Recognizing Service

In an article released August 25, 2014, Washington Monthly ranked Texas A&M as a top four university in the “Contribution to the Public Good” rankings. Considerations for the award included research and service to the nation as well as

academic standing and rigor. As the highest ranked university from the state of Texas, A&M was praised for social mobility (recruiting and graduating students), research productivity (conducting leading scholarship) and service (encouraging students to give back to their country through service and civic engagement). As an extension of these accolades, the Interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts recently suggested the following in a college-wide email: “Our university is dedicated to improving the lives of first generation students, to produce research that has impact, and to fostering civic responsibility.” By echoing the College of Liberal Arts’ commitment to these ideals, the importance of student service continues to prevail. This foundation is an extension of the original land grant mission of the school, which is to serve the public in its endeavors.

As Texas A&M continues to promote service to students, it is important to understand the implications of engaging narrative theory and student development theory related to this movement. These implications support the use of these theories for future understanding and improvements. The following sections include the theoretical implications found in this research study.

Convergence Between Narrative of Self and Narrative Persuasion

As stated in Chapter I, narrative theory is understood in two distinct ways. First, narratives of the self describe how people make sense of their own experiences by telling stories that highlight and reflect their own values and, through storytelling, construct meaningful individual identities (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). Others understand narrative as a tool for enacting persuasion (Fisher, 1984; 1987). As such, narrative acts as

persuasion when stories are shared with others to change attitudes, beliefs, or to take action both in political arenas and in work organizations.

Gergen and Gergen (1983) explained self-narrative as “an individual’s account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time” (p. 255). These narratives create order and are essential to establishing an individual’s sense of meaning and purpose (Bettelheim, 1976). By utilizing narrative in this way, individuals attempt to create coherence among various life experiences. Also, according to Gergen and Gergen (1983), there are three forms of narrative: stability, progressive, and regressive. These forms explain how narratives work within an evaluative space. Stability refers to the linkage of experiences while maintaining unchanged beliefs and attitudes. Development through narrative is also achieved by progression or regression. Here, the utility of narrative moves a person’s sense of self and worth to more positive or negative results. The social utility of this type of narrative allows people to find value in establishing and sustaining organizations based on sharing this content and then creating narrative within appropriate social interactions. Furthermore, narrative construction relies on an implicit social act. Narrative constructions also have behavioral implications that are subject to social evaluation, especially when the perceived norms have been violated. As narratives are shared in public spaces, the process of social molding takes place, often causing scrutiny and accuracy verification (Gergen & Gergen, 1983).

Narrative of the self and narrative persuasion theories complement each other in interesting ways. By engaging in narrative as persuasion, students have the potential to demonstrate personal narratives unique to their individual identities. By believing the

story themselves, people can then persuade others to believe it as well. This demonstrates the powerful potential of engaging in self narratives while also utilizing narrative as persuasion.

In one particular interview, the student executive explained how The Big Event student leadership motivates new volunteers to serve. As highlighted in Chapter III:

I would ask them about the last time someone had served them. Did they help you study for a test, or pack up your books when they dropped you off for that test? When was the last time someone smiled at you and said “have a nice day,” and it truly made your day better? Everyone around you is serving each other and everyone includes you. Those who serve only serve because someone served them first. By participating in The Big Event, you can make someone feel the way you feel when someone does something nice for you.

While this student explained how The Big Event student leadership makes sense of their own self-narrative in relation to their service experiences, they also combined narrative as persuasion by asking the other person to consider his or her personal experiences. By posing a question to the person they intend to recruit, the potential volunteer is positioned to respond with his or her narrative of self. In this specific example, narrative of self is coupled with narrative as persuasion to create unification and resonance in the person. As presented in the Chapter I literature review, several distinct narrative topics are connected to the interview findings in Chapter III. They include:

- Coherence and Fidelity
- Instrumental and Constitutive Approaches

- Construction of Social Reality
- Consubstantiality and Identification
- Sensemaking
- Reduction of Uncertainty
- Temporality
- Creative Utility of Storytelling

These narrative topics are tied to the four dominant themes coded as personal leadership development, individual leadership philosophy, service-mindedness, and the role of Texas A&M traditions. In the following, I will explain the findings in relation to coherence and fidelity.

Coherence and Fidelity

From a rhetorical perspective, narrative creates coherence and fidelity through the use of stories (Fisher, 1989). The concept of coherence allows people to make sense of a story's message and the way it resonates with the audience to initiate action or a change in beliefs. Fidelity refers to how the message "rings true" through past experiences and knowledge. The values laden in stories make these concepts persuasive (Fisher, 1989).

Aggie leaders enacted persuasive devices to recruit other members and motivate those students already serving through The Big Event. Executives used strategic choices to amplify their own personal stories to attract like-minded students to also serve. By speaking to students on a level that "meets them where they are," The Big Event leadership captures participants and initiates action and confirms their beliefs regarding

service. By using vivid language and examples, leaders share powerful stories to create a sense of empowerment for volunteers (Carlson, 1989; 1995).

As evident in the interviews, people are basic storytellers (Fisher, 1989). Sometimes these stories are shared in relatively private ways, such as one-on-one conversations (Browning, 1992). Student executives enacted the notion of fidelity by articulating how their own Big Event experiences had motivated them to seek a leadership position in their junior and senior years. Various student leaders consistently commented how they are called to perpetuate this sense of responsibility to future generations of Aggie servant leaders. While highlighting these details, the students drew attention to the importance of perpetual fidelity, or creating and sustaining this in present and future generations of Aggies serving through The Big Event. Specifically, these students told me stories that showed evidence of resonance and coherence in themselves and, in turn, through others. By linking their personal values and explaining their stories, they often spoke of ways in which the institutional story of selfless service to others rings true. I now articulate the valuable use of the instrumental approach to understand and apply narrative theory.

Instrumental Approach

The instrumental approach of narrative creates a sense of moral urgency for intended audiences. Related to this dissertation study, I argue that The Big Event employs this engaged form of narrative to instill a desire to serve and say “thank you” to the Bryan/College Station community. By promoting successful stories of previous service encounters, Big Event executives perpetuate the narrative of selfless service year

after year. I also contend this narrative sustains future growth and achievement, builds tradition, creates excitement, and ultimately advances the organizational mission. Persuasion is also evident in this engaging use of narrative. Volunteer enrollment numbers continue to rise, and student executives attribute this to the power of sharing stories and building the credibility of The Big Event. Next, I provide an explanation regarding the constitutive approach to narrative. This explanation exemplifies connections to the findings.

Constitutive Approach

A constitutive approach to narrative suggests the use of proclamations of allegiance (Charland, 1987). By building a sense of unity among student volunteers, The Big Event connects Aggie students in a shared identification of loyalty and selfless service. This identity demonstrates a deep understanding of the narrative (Burke, 1945). Specifically, students highlighted their personal accounts of identification in relation to the mission and goals of the organization. Training programs during the year include elements that seek to build a loyal allegiance among organizational members that is perpetual and lasting beyond their education at Texas A&M. By unifying members through a sense of shared reality, the construction of this act is now explained.

Construction of Social Reality

Organizational communication theory asserts the importance of narrative as a way to understand the local environment. Mumby (1993) suggested, “narratives function to construct the social reality that constitutes the lived world of social actors.” Multiple interviews echoed this understanding. For example, various student executives cited

their lived experiences as they explained their leadership philosophies. They spoke of how they made decisions and learned about their personal leadership identity through the process. Their stories were full of decision points that eventually resonated with their personal experiences. These student experiences exemplify how students construct a social reality that prioritizes selfless service as they (the social actors) find meaning through The Big Event. Narrative clearly links their experiences with meaningful implications for their lives. By utilizing understandings of consubstantiality and identification, these findings are linked to the importance of engaging in narrative theory in this research study.

Consubstantiality and Identification

According to Burke (1957), consubstantiality and identification described the process of humans identifying similar values relating to others “like” them. Personal values are illuminated through storytelling and thus connections are made to create a sense of unification. As such, students identified themselves by people they perceived to be like them. For example, students who were more inclined to serve were drawn to people who valued selfless service like they did. By seeking out others who shared these common interests, students were naturally led to the Leadership and Service Center and specifically The Big Event at Texas A&M. In the interviews I conducted, I asked questions strategically related to the students’ personal values. Their responses included evidence of consubstantiality through the act of this shared identification marked by similar goals while still maintaining their individuality and uniqueness. While the students represented their uniqueness as they recounted their story during interviews, the

process of consubstantiality showed their ability to identify similarities and yet ultimately maintain their individual identity. The processes of identification and consubstantiality are interestingly evident in the students' interview accounts. Furthermore, sensemaking extends this explanation of identification and consubstantiality by evoking a need for creating meaning through these processes.

Sensemaking

Narrative is a medium of sensemaking by providing meaning to experiences (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Bruner, 1991; Miller, 2003; Weick & Browning, 1986). Stories become natural to sensemaking and are used to examine the informational system within an organization. Student executives demonstrated sensemaking through their accounts of growth as volunteers during the years. One student claimed his involvement and responsibility each year were directly tied to the experiences he shared with others. Through narrative, he spoke of mentors who challenged him to make his own mark on the organization. By compiling all of his experiences, leadership growth, and desire to participate through these formative years, he was able to create meaningful purpose for his actions. Through this act of sensemaking, he found his passion for service and leadership.

Sensemaking strongly connects to the understanding of The Big Event environment. Because narrative acts as a medium of sensemaking (Weick, 1988), The Big Event student executives have a unique opportunity to tell stories that inspire and motivate others to spark action through volunteerism. By sharing stories as a way for Aggies to make sense of their identification as change agents, student leaders should

provide outlets for these storytelling moments to happen. Furthermore, utilizing Weick's (1988) research will provide ways for "people to continue to act in ways that create value and meaning to their actions" (p. 3).

Sensemaking should also include a process of reflection, or a period of personal critique, to acquire deep understandings of volunteer work and experiences. As explained before, this practice allows for deep meaning and the connection of learning outcomes to occur within students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Howard, 2001). The act of reflection is extremely important from a Student Affairs perspective, too. By emphasizing the use of self-reflection to increase awareness and understanding, students will connect their learning with personal meaning. By extending the sensemaking principles to include a time of reflection similar to the process of service-learning, The Big Event student executives will intentionally train Aggies to be leaders who are well-informed and attentive to their own values and beliefs. Next, I discuss the process of reduction of uncertainty. By understanding this process, sensemaking is achieved and further perpetuated.

Reduction of Uncertainty

The important process of reducing uncertainty is vitally important to accomplishing strong meaning and understanding through stories (Weick & Browning, 1986). For many organizations, the role of stories serves as a way to reduce and manage uncertainty for members. The strength of narrative coherence and fidelity rests within how organization members situate their own experiences and personal history with the messages they hear and promote through stories (Weick & Browning, 1986; Browning

& McNamee, 2012). In interviews, students recollected how the organization has stayed true to its overall mission by expressing appreciation to Bryan/College Station residents. By doing so, they sense a calling to serve due to their own personal goals that are consistent with the appreciation they yearn to express. This compatibility of needs and actions is a result of the strength of the organizational story demonstrated by The Big Event. Related to the reduction of uncertainty, temporality is an important concept to understand. By processing how temporality has a bearing on the impact of narrative, I seek to explain this implication in relation to my findings.

Temporality

The past, present, and future successes and challenges of any organization are multifaceted and complex (Boje, 2001). In terms of The Big Event, the temporal nature of these narratives situates the entire organization with a lasting institutional story to tell. Tied to the foundations of excellence, selfless service, and leadership at Texas A&M, temporality is evident by the strong history, the stable current status, and the promising future evident in student interviews and textual analysis. With growing resources and institutional support, The Big Event is poised to harbor these stories by continuing their use in the years to come.

In the conversations and interactions during the research, students were consistently engaging in narrative that promoted The Big Event's overall mission and specific goals. The students used emotional appeals to engage others who were not yet assisting the group. In particular, when I asked students about their recruitment practices, they elaborated on the stories they told to others about their own experiences. They

hoped their own stories of past accomplishments, present fulfillment, and future opportunities would spark excitement and create desire for service in the person they were attempting to recruit. Students' excitement and enthusiasm for the organization and its purpose were evident in their words and actions (as shared in the interviews). Specifically, multiple students cited the impact emotional appeals made on them during their time as new volunteers. Furthermore, students told me how they were now even more motivated to use the same techniques as they used with potential new volunteers about the importance of serving through The Big Event. These students certainly engaged in powerful, vivid storytelling. In the following, I articulate the importance of creative storytelling and explain how The Big Event benefits from this act.

Creative Utility of Storytelling

Brown (1990) suggested that the characteristics and functions of storytelling are a dominant force in any organization. According to Fisher (1989), stories are the most powerful way to reach an audience. The Big Event leadership team utilized a variety of media to tell their stories to Aggie students. They used stories as a means to appeal to students to become involved with service. By using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and email to spread the word about recruitment efforts and upcoming events, students reached potential volunteers through creative memes and other clever advertising. By including references to trendy popular culture geared to a college student's knowledge and interests, student leaders were successful in capturing their intended audience. By spotlighting each individual's work, the students encouraged and bolstered a sense of

importance to the overall efforts of the organization. Interviewees described the use of humor as a fun way to capture students and attract them to the organization.

An analysis of the hashtags representing The Big Event revealed evidence centered on humor, creativity, and popular culture appeals. Some posts were time specific and reminded volunteers about deadlines to sign up for The Big Event. Other photos represented famous people who were encouraging students to serve others, specifically through The Big Event.

Brown (1990) studied storytelling as a dominant force in an organization. As such, stories must be legitimate and relate to overall needs in the organization. Though important concerns with narrative critique in organizational settings exist (Conrad, 2011), I seek to illuminate the positive aspects of utilizing narrative. The Big Event student executives emphasized the importance of meeting the community's needs in meaningful ways. By telling stories that resonated and echoed their individual needs and desires, student volunteers are buying in to the organizational purpose of The Big Event. Narratives certainly create a sense of empowerment. Many student executives cite the evidence of empowerment through transformative thinking and action. When students believe they can contribute through service, they are positioned to unite and achieve success. By also using self-narrative to make meaning from personal lived experiences, students embrace a sense of confidence and ability to contribute to the greater good. As evidenced in the student interviews, narrative through storytelling is a powerful way to make and attach meaning in language.

Storytelling and Social Change

During this research experience, Big Event executives have been focused on telling the “right” story to a targeted audience. By tailoring their story to the Aggie audience, the executives must make decisions about the details to include. By using pathos and ethos to appeal to participants, these devices create a story that inspires service (Aristotle, 1941). By doing so, they sought to increase volunteer participation and surpass their goal of 20,000 students for the 2014 event. To achieve this goal, they expanded their target audiences to reach new student groups.

At Texas A&M, there is a public narrative regarding the importance of developing leaders for current and future societal problems. The Big Event is situated within this larger narrative and is reinforced by the promotion of institutional core values and university-wide initiatives that emphasize leadership, service, and excellence (Texas A&M University, 2014). By acting as an agent for improving communities, The Big Event organization recognizes the value of good stories and other empowering narratives as vital to future success and growth. These “good” stories have the potential to rally support for a cause, build leadership capabilities, and strengthen communities.

The medium for storytelling utilized by The Big Event leadership team was mostly online. This highlights the extremely powerful potential of online media to share narratives. Student Affairs professionals should recognize and utilize the powerful results this form of media offers. By moving to online forms of promotion and narrative sharing, student leaders are connecting powerful messages to their intended audiences. By engaging in social media, The Big Event brand was amplified through strategic posts

and activities. Framing also served as a powerful way to reach specifically targeted audiences. By using a frame, Big Event leaders were able to create an interpretive structure of understanding the content. Then, these stories filled the frame and supported it (Fairhurst, 2007).

Storytelling also serves as a form of organizing (Weick & Browning, 1986). When stories are shared, people identify with common elements to create unity. Ultimately, The Big Event uses stories to bring people together through shared values. These expressions of stories highlight shared responsibility and a collective desire to show appreciation to local residents through one big day of unified service. These sentiments are then shared through media that excite and attract other members to contribute their time and talents as well. Eventually, membership growth is developed and sustained by these actions. This creates a greater investment in the meaning people make of their experiences (Tompkins, 1984).

In the following, I will discuss the theoretical implications regarding student development theory, specifically focusing on leadership skills.

Linkage of Student Development Theory to Individual Leadership Philosophy

The findings and conclusions from this research study outline larger implications for Student Affairs professionals. Many of the following explanations should be applied in larger Student Affairs contexts to understand the potential of similar service event structures and outcomes. These results are likely not isolated to this one study, yet rather can be applied to a host of similar research studies. The mission, focus, and functions of

Student Affairs professionals stem from the theories found in the pertinent literature. As stated in Chapter I, literature has been used as a way to bolster and legitimize the profession while urging a sense of “change and inclusion to the broader university, mainly including faculty and administrators” (Hoffman, 1996, p.10). It is imperative for Student Affairs professionals and faculty members to understand student development theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Translating theory to practice is critical to achieve maximum student learning (Brown & Barr, 1990; Knefelkamp, 1984).

Sanford (1967) suggested that development is a growth process in which the individual becomes increasingly positioned to understand and act on lived experiences and influences. Rogers (1990) defined student development as “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capacities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (p. 27).

The second dominant theme coded in the interviews is individual leadership philosophy. This reflects the students’ understandings of leadership and how they view themselves. Students learn through extracurricular activities such as The Big Event to develop leadership potential. One student stated:

I define leadership as someone who is going to get their hands dirty with the people they are leading and leading by example. This is someone who is a step ahead of everyone in terms of planning and someone who is always prepared for anything. Everyone I have looked up to as a leader has always been the hardest working individual on the team and led by example.

By emphasizing the institutional story at Texas A&M through the students' reflections, the core values of the school are aligned and learned by students through extracurricular activities such as The Big Event. This experience creates a space for students to further learn and apply their identification as an Aggie in a way that confirms the importance of selfless service. Student leaders are enacting the institutional core values as a necessary means by which to enhance their overall Aggie experience. Another student leader echoed these sentiments:

Like I said earlier, I like to lead by example and think some of the best leaders do it this way. Being on top of everything is always crucial to me because if you do not have the answers then no one does. It sets a good example for the followers and you set a bar for others to reach.

Specifically, some student executives articulated the importance of strong organization and motivation while leading. By reflecting on how these elements shape their individual experiences, students extend their understandings of how service facilitates social good. These findings suggest how The Big Event uniquely provides an effective, transformative outlet for Aggie students to learn and solidify the importance of living the value of selfless service. Through narrative, they demonstrate how these experiences impact their lives in very profound ways. By continuing to share empowering narratives related to their experiences, students perpetuate the impact these processes possess.

Servant Leadership

The Big Event utilizes a Servant Leadership model in the annual service event. The ideals and tenets of this theory were evident in this research study. By using *The*

Servant book to frame weekly discussions and understandings of service, the utility and learning outcomes of service leadership are vast. Again, Servant Leadership should be understood as both a framework and a philosophy. Greenleaf (1970) wondered how and if service causes students to become more autonomous and servant-like. He emphasized the importance of a leader identifying the need to be a servant while answering a call to action through service to others. In the interviews I conducted, students consistently highlighted the importance of personally answering a call to action. According to them, each student has a call to serve the Aggie community. By using narrative to emphasize these community needs, Servant Leadership is encouraged and enacted. For example, evidence of leadership development is demonstrated by comments of how The Big Event impacted them. Students included self-discipline, time management, and how to accomplish goals that will help in their future careers.

Servant Leadership is steeped in Biblical contexts. During my participant observation time, many student executives identified with being Christians, particularly Protestants. Their language and actions were often followed by Bible references or scripture. By emphasizing service to others as the highest priority (Principle 1), student executives cultivate deep commitment to the organizational mission. By also meeting the needs of others, student executives model this by supporting one another with organizational and personal needs. Although my observation was limited, the consistency of their encouragement was evident beyond the boundaries of the organization. As Principle 4 suggests, The Big Event certainly leaves a legacy to society. By modeling Servant Leadership (Principle 5) and developing more servant leaders

(Principle 6), The Big Event reflects the basic components of a Servant Leadership training organization.

Voices of dissent are certainly evident regarding Servant Leadership training. For some, Servant Leadership theory is too soft and too unrealistic for practice. Others note the gendered rhetoric of roles and norms associated with these ideals (Eicher-Catt, 2005). Visual analysis revealed gendered roles regarding the activities represented in pictures.

The archival photos ultimately leave me wondering about the patterns of involvement for Aggie students through the years. A lack of diversity is evident in the photos, yet I must acknowledge the large Caucasian population at Texas A&M. Although these photos potentially neglect to account for other populations serving during these representative years, this suggests a problem. An array of photos needs to include a representative sample of the diversity present at Texas A&M during The Big Event, even if it is limited. I also particularly wonder about the inclusivity of The Big Event since its creation and about the intentionality of including or excluding certain populations in the community. These isolated photos do not represent a comprehensive amount of data adequate to answer these important questions regarding diverse involvement. An expanded study should consider these questions to understand inclusion and involvement more specifically.

It is important to understand how Servant Leadership theory links with the emergent theme of individual leadership philosophy. By highlighting Servant Leadership as a signature training program for The Big Event, I described the impact it has on

participants. I now explain the theoretical implication regarding Generational Theory. Specifically, I suggest conclusions regarding how Aggies are atypical of the traditional, anecdotal understandings and assumptions of Millennials.

Generational Theory Regarding Aggies

The current generation of undergraduate college students presents a unique set of characteristics. Aggie students certainly exhibit several characteristics that define Millennials. These characteristics include their age (as a traditional undergraduate or graduate student), high expectations for success, and inclination toward service. Howe and Strauss (2000) defined Millennials as “the next great generation.” As the largest, most affluent, and ethnically diverse generation ever in American history, the strength of this generation should be understood and embraced.

In an August 15, 2014 New York Times article, “Generation Nice”, by Sam Tanenhaus, there are approximately 80 million Millennials living in America. Rather than an entitled group of young people, this generation is actually “complex and introspective.” According to the article, “Millennials are skeptical of institutions—political and religious—and prefer to improvise solutions to the challenges of the moment.” Misunderstood as a generation that is me-oriented without regard for a collectivistic society, Millennials are poised to share their talents and challenge these stereotypes. Locally, The Big Event suggests that Millennials are do-gooders that collectively favor future employers that embrace the values of good citizenship. By learning the importance of being a good citizen in college, students are more inclined to find careers that also embrace noble citizenship and service ideals. Also, according to the

New York Times article, Millennials are actually less narcissistic than they are assumed to be, and they also highly value empathy and open-mindedness. By believing that “their own best days are ahead,” Millennials are apt to embrace routinized service initiatives such as The Big Event. By serving within a large group of people who are like-minded and agents of change, the future of collective service may bear a strong resemblance to the current Big Event organization.

During this study, I saw evidence of Aggies defying the stereotypical assumptions of Generational Theory related to Millennials. Academic research also concludes that Millennials should not necessarily be characterized as they are anecdotally through media. I learned how Aggies believe that hard work and service to others are important and a top priority completed collectively rather than individually. They are seemingly suspicious of established institutions, yet The Big Event is perceived to be their own signature idea to embrace. Although they understand and value the importance of individual hard work, they tend to take care of their own in a special way. Not only is this expected of fellow Aggies, it is also a way to keep one another accountable as they participate during their school years. By engaging in service projects such as The Big Event, Aggies exemplify their shared identities by collectively embodying selfless service while dismissing the individualistic notions of typical Millennials.

During my time as a participant-observer in weekly meetings and other interactions, I was consistently surprised about the amount of respect extended to one another. For example, I often heard student executives encouraging, complimenting, or

affirming another person's progress for the week, his or her willingness to accept a challenge, or courtesy demonstrated to another Big Event volunteer. This created an atmosphere of friendliness and support among the executive team members. The language used by the Director and Co-Director certainly echoed this same form. Each meeting, these leaders were verbally thanking their own members for the tasks they had completed and for their dedication to the organization as a whole.

Furthermore, our current actions send "ripple effects" into the future (Loeb, 1999). Although this generation has challenges, we must not stereotype these students to certain limitations. The Big Event unifies many generations by boundary spanning various age groups. The Big Event student executives actively promote the importance of assisting the elderly to meet their individual needs. Ultimately, the Aggie spirit is an agent of change for the past, present, and future.

Tensions and Contradictions

The findings of this study raise important awareness of a few issues. To begin, issues of race and class are at the heart of the underlying assumptions and foundations of this study. By applying a grounded, Protestant Christian perspective to a secular service context, students risk misunderstanding and altered results of translation. The Big Event is very prescriptive in nature due to the specific mission of thanking the community. Since the importance of service is so strongly pushed, the compatibility of actions such as thanking and serving should be carefully considered and more aligned. By delving into the issues of race, class, and mission orientation intentionally, The Big Event leaders can strive for improvement regarding their overall message and impact.

Closing Thoughts on Theoretical Implications

The act of citizenship is a practice, a habit that must be learned (Aristotle, 1941). Arendt (1958) suggested that words and actions are essential to citizenship. By creating a space for students to learn the importance of active citizenship, all within an active service environment like Texas A&M, they are poised to contribute and give back during their time in college. By engaging in service with fellow Aggies, a sense of identification and pride is instilled in each student who believes in the importance of selfless service.

Checkoway (2001) contended that multicultural educational challenges and opportunities exist. By embracing diverse neighbors in the Bryan/College Station area, students are taught to care for the needs of others by appreciating them and saying “thank you” through The Big Event. The importance of including diverse neighborhoods to serve was cited in multiple conversations with The Big Event executives. During participant observation, I heard countless mentions of the importance of thanking all residents no matter their needs or demographics. By breaking down the barriers of difference, students are forced to think and act more inclusively. While consistently promoting the idea of “serving everyone” no matter their age, race, or class status, student volunteers are confronted with opportunities to embrace difference. Ideally, these moments expose students to perpetuated opportunities to engage in service for social change. Next, Chapter V includes discussion, practical implications, limitations, and future directions.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND SUMMARY

Some may boast of prowess bold

Of the school they think so grand

But there's a spirit can ne'er be told

It's the Spirit of Aggieland

We are the Aggies, the Aggies are we

True to each other as Aggies can be

We've got to fight boys

We've got to fight!

We've got to fight for Maroon and White

After they've boosted all the rest

Then they will come and join the best

For we are the Aggies, the Aggies are we

We're from Texas AMC

-The Spirit of Aggieland

This chapter includes a discussion of the practical implications for practice, limitations, and future directions concluded from this study. In consultation with the

Director of the Leadership and Service Center at Texas A&M, I have developed a report outlining specific recommendations to be considered for future best practices. I begin with a summary of the justification of the study, methodology, findings, and theoretical implications. The chapter continues with a discussion of the practical implications, limitations, and future directions.

Justification of Study

This study focused on answering how The Big Event communicates the importance of service and leadership to students. During my findings and analysis, I suggested ways to apply narrative, student development, Servant Leadership, and Generational Theory to conclude practical implications for the Leadership and Service Center at Texas A&M. As the institution continues to connect classroom instruction with the core value of selfless service, service-learning has continued to emerge as a meaningful way to teach students. As such, I posed the following research questions:

- 1) How do the leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M?
- 2) What is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion?

This study provides rich and meaningful results for improved best practices in civic engagement and service-learning in higher education.

Methodology

I utilized qualitative research methods to conduct this study. Specifically, I conducted interviews, completed textual analysis, narrative analysis, and visual analysis

while engaging in participant observation to provide conclusions for my research questions. I completed a visual analysis of archival and social media photos to support my interview conclusions. I focused on the use of narrative to understand how The Big Event student leaders construct service as important and necessary for fellow Aggies.

Findings

This study suggested important findings. Regarding research question one, themes of personal leadership development, individual leadership philosophy, service-mindedness, and the role of Texas A&M traditions resulted. Research question two provided answers regarding best recruitment practices and training procedures, need for improvement regarding internal relations, value of personal experiences, skill building, and the urgency of future growth.

Discussion

There are multiple theoretical implications for this study, including the emergence of narrative of self and persuasive narrative utilized in storytelling. Student development theoretical implications resulted in an expanded understanding of Servant Leadership and Generational Theory. Specifically, the understanding of how Aggies are and are not true Millennials creates notable meaning for future studies.

These results yield an interesting opportunity to learn how Texas A&M promotes service and leadership as core values and critical components of the Aggie experience. Texas A&M is globally recognized as an institution integrating service with a world class educational experience (Texas A&M University, 2014). Next, I suggest five important practical implications concluded from this study.

Implications for Practice

Several practical implications result from the findings of this dissertation. These practical implications are in the form of recommendations for future best practices with The Big Event. These practical suggestions include:

- Emphasizing the organizational mission
- Creating a master plan for future growth and expansion
- Improving communication of organizational meetings leading up to The Big Event
- Developing a volunteer training program
- Implementing a more developed service-learning curriculum in Communication classrooms

These best practices are based on the study's overall recommendations for The Big Event and future related service opportunities at Texas A&M. By diligently following the guiding principles and meaningful outcomes of service-learning, these implications suggest powerful ways to implement future progress. To emphasize the recommendations below, the service-learning definition utilized by the Texas A&M Leadership and Service Center is restated from Chapter I and is followed by The Big Event mission statement. The definition of service-learning, according to the Leadership and Service Center at Texas A&M, is:

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured

opportunities for reflection designed to promote student learning and development.

-Jacoby, 1996

The Center provides a continued explanation of the importance of service-learning:

We believe true campus and community engagement occurs when a student's personal development is fully integrated with learning. Through intentional programs, services, advising, and advocacy, we encourage students to become engaged in meaningful learning experiences. Student Affairs practitioners are natural partners for faculty members who are interested in creating a holistic learning experience for students.

-Leadership and Service Center Website

By understanding how the Leadership and Service Center situates the importance of service and meaningful learning outcomes that come from these activities, clear practical implications are concluded in this study of The Big Event. Specifically, The Big Event's mission statement emphasizes many of the same ideals of the Leadership and Service Center. With the following recommendations, The Big Event will continue to grow in both size and quality. I now discuss each practical implication related to my findings.

Emphasize Organizational Mission

Through service-oriented activities, The Big Event promotes campus and community unity as students come together for one day to express their gratitude for the support from the surrounding community.

-The Big Event Mission Statement

In response to public criticism about socioeconomic needs related to the recipients who benefit from The Big Event, student executives should be more intentional and overt

when communicating the overall organizational mission to volunteers. Aligning the mission with the messages given by The Big Event leadership is very important. Selfless service is heavily emphasized, yet thanking the community is the fundamental mission. Careful consideration should be given to evaluate these similar, yet conflicting, messages. Once this is considered and clarified more carefully, students must be reminded about the mission during their Big Event experience. The mission statement should be more viewable on the website, on all social media outlets, through other media such as KBTX commercials, on the university forms they are required to sign, and during the weekly meetings and presentations to volunteers. The mission will resonate with the students if they are often reminded of the mission leading up to the Day Of (Fairhurst, et al. 1997). Student leaders must be mindful of the communicative concepts of narrative, including the persuasive elements of coherence, fidelity, and sensemaking (Fisher, 1987; Weick, 1988).

Online media should be utilized to promote the mission and other strategic messages of the organization. This medium for storytelling is a leading way to reach Millennials effectively. Student Affairs practitioners and student executives should understand this media form and use it to achieve their organizational goals.

Bolster Overall Communication Strategy at Organizational Meetings

Happy Big Event Week!

—Salutation in email correspondence from Big Event student executive

The days leading up to The Big Event are critically important for student executives to communicate their mission, vision, and goals to all volunteers. Multiple

organization meetings are held during the week of The Big Event to match student groups with their job assignments in the community. These meetings serve as the primary way students perceive and potentially identify with the intended ideals of the organization. To be clear, a representative from each student group is required to attend these meetings. All student volunteers only gather on the Day Of with their other group members.

To effectively communicate the ideals of The Big Event, key areas are identified in which student executives can overhaul their content and delivery to more efficiently and powerfully reach their audience:

- Add a ten minute portion to the beginning of the meeting to frame the importance of selfless service.
- Rotate presentational duties among student executives and share their understandings and experiences regarding service and leadership through narrative.
- And very importantly, a reflection component should be added in the week following The Big Event.

Framing the Importance of Selfless Service

Reminding students why they chose to serve will be key to success both individually and collectively. Students need to be reminded about the linkage between institutional core values and how The Big Event works. When they identify as Aggies, they will also find deeper meaning in the service work they complete. I suggest using a visual aid to show the definitions and applications of the core values. Be interactive with

the audience. Engage the students in a powerful presentation regarding the important work they are part of while serving in The Big Event.

Sharing Personal Narratives with Audience

Because of the powerful self discovery and persuasion techniques of narrative concluded from this study (Brown, 1990; Fisher, 1987; Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Jasinski, 2001; Tompkins, 1984), student executives should intentionally share their personal stories to reach the audience. By sharing shortened versions of what service means to them, the audience will look forward to their service projects as a way to find the same importance in their own work. Student executives should also share vivid examples with their audience to emphasize and promote shared identification and consubstantiality (Burke, 1957). Executives should use photos to demonstrate their stories while also adding humor appropriately. Audience adaptation is key when delivering these oral appeals for service.

Incorporating the Use of Reflection

With proper reflection, the students will likely be more inspired and connected to the work they are completing. Critical reflection allows students to make meaning out of their experiences and then connect their learning to personal life stories (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Howard, 2001). Students should avoid superficial recollections of their stories and include written and/or verbal reflection to specifically locate how and when they were affected by the service opportunity. Student leaders from each volunteer group should be trained to facilitate these reflection activities. Questions and other prompts should be developed in collaboration with representatives from the Leadership and

Service Center to ensure rigor and adequate requirements for the activities. By adapting this critical component of service-learning to fit a project like The Big Event, students will further see the importance of their roles as selfless servants. This will also help to divert misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations on the part of the student executives and the volunteers in future years.

Achieving Synergy

Synergy is a powerful way to create optimal group communication success (Baird & Weinberg, 1981). By engaging in synergy with group members also volunteering during The Big Event, students are able to achieve a higher level of results on the Day Of. As such, how we understand synergy in group dynamics should be more closely understood regarding how this operates within service contexts. For example, how do participants who do not know one another achieve synergy during a one-time experience? In future research, creating a foundation of understanding synergy within service contexts would be helpful and informative for all student leaders and participants.

Maximizing Leadership Effectiveness

As The Big Event continues to grow, leadership effectiveness is important to understand. Specifically, understanding the role and potential power of narrative to engage participants is essential. For instance, students are able to capture their own leadership experiences and then translate them into a story that motivates, inspires, and encourages others to follow in their footsteps (Fairhurst, 2007). Currently, The Big Event executives succeed in leading others to serve, particularly in their own

organization. I propose that student executives and committee members extend their storytelling habits beyond the boundaries of the organization to achieve even greater buy-in to the organization. By actively recruiting students through sharing personal narratives to find common ground and raise awareness, The Big Event will continue to thrive and prosper.

Create Volunteer Training Program

The Division of Student Affairs actively engages students in world-class experiences that prepare them for a life of service and leadership in a global society.

—Vision of The Division of Student Affairs at Texas A&M

As The Big Event continues to grow in participation, two important topics must be taught to the volunteers:

- Communication and social skills with resident/volunteer interactions at the work sites on the Day Of
- Risk management issues and contingency plans from the University's perspective as to safety standards in adverse situations

Some student leaders mentioned the need for improving social skills when working with residents. For example, some students are uncertain how to initiate and sustain a conversation with the people they are serving. By providing basic conversation topics and related pointers regarding behavioral courtesies, students would likely be more prepared for interactions during their service experiences. Some Bryan/College Station neighbors and their residences are also perceived to be too risky for service

work. Mostly because of neighborhood locations and crime reports in those areas, The Big Event has decided to avoid them. If future Big Events seek to expand their service region, I wonder what it could look like if student leaders pushed for the opportunity to serve these populations. Specifically, The Big Event leaders need to forge new ways to serve the needs of all community members while maintaining high standards of risk management.

To conclude the training program each year, The Big Event leadership should create a post-The Big Event opportunity for the students to reflect and share the importance of lifelong service and volunteerism. By encouraging the students to lead and serve after their time at Texas A&M, the perpetuation of selfless service will continue to strengthen and grow. By telling and writing stories that resonate with their personal service experiences as Aggies, The Big Event student executives in the training program can instill a desire to continue as a servant leader in the future.

Student Affairs professionals and faculty members must learn to play to the strengths of Aggies and embrace certain characteristics of Millennials. Their team orientation is ideal for serving in The Big Event. They prioritize the important calling of social involvement placed on an individual's life, and they believe in the importance of hard work and perseverance during hard times. Further researching and experimenting with ways to train these talented students who are inclined to serve can create more meaningful service-learning opportunities. These experiences will amplify the students to critically think and act in our increasingly challenging global workplace.

Strengthening Volunteer Management

Specifically, I propose further understanding of the contexts of first time, one time, and continuing volunteers serving through The Big Event. By applying our knowledge of how leadership theory motivates each group of volunteers, the Communication field is poised to suggest other insights regarding the best way to meet these goals. Communication scholars have supported the use of training programs to orient new and returning volunteers to their service opportunities (Frumkin, 2005; Gazley et al., 2012; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Organizational communication theory should serve as a primary guide for The Big Event student executives as they continue to lead thousands of students in this one day service project. Specifically, students should be intentional in their training by including concepts of narrative theory to impact participants and encourage them to maximize the effectiveness of their service.

Strategize Master Plan for National and International Expansion

Big Event Goes Global

-The Battalion Headline, February 2014

The Big Event student executives have prioritized the growth of the organization both nationally and internationally. As leaders strategize to identify effective ways to expand their mission, student executives should mobilize one of their strongest assets, the Aggie Network. By utilizing the alumni network to reach a wider geographical audience, students can connect graduates with opportunities to continue service in their current communities. Student executives should implement a way to gauge and utilize the interest of former Big Event executives to request their

assistance. Former Aggie students, and specifically those who served through The Big Event, can initiate local action and growth at universities and other entities in their areas.

The idea of forming a national Big Event executive board was shared in one student interview. Working from this idea, a national network of student representatives from other schools would need to unify and promote The Big Event with one mission, one logo, and a day of service. In addition to these unifying elements, branding would also be a captivating and effective way to spread the spirit of selfless service. By creating a brand that promotes name recognition and identification across a wide array of volunteers, The Big Event can truly become a large force for volunteer service beyond the city limits of Aggieland.

As Texas A&M continues to support study abroad opportunities for current students, The Big Event leadership should find ways for global engagement of the organization's goals and purpose. The progress made in 2013 and 2014 regarding global growth is an excellent place to start. Building upon this success as a continued partnership with the Texas A&M Study Abroad office, future service sites should be feasible. The existing relationships with network partners affiliated with the Study Abroad office should alleviate some of the groundwork required for future service sites. Specifically, personal narratives should be shared with potential participants to promote global growth as well. By collaborating in this endeavor, The Big Event can achieve future global growth in the coming years.

Implement Service-Learning Based Curriculum in More Communication Courses

“Service-learning constitutes a form of pedagogy that engages students in community service and regular guided reflection on the service in order to deepen learning and enrich communities.”

(Britt, 2012, p. 80)

My final recommendation relates to the vital importance of implementing more service-learning opportunities in Communication courses (Perry & Imperial, 2001). Specifically, by expanding opportunities for Communication majors and minors to be exposed to service, an increased amount of students will link theory and practical applications of service-learning initiatives (Petronio, 1999; Simpson & Seibold, 2008). By emphasizing typical extracurricular service in course content, students will likely connect their learning with meaningful experiences they encountered through service (Conville, 2001). Specifically, Texas A&M has a unique opportunity to reach Aggies who are already inclined to serve. Service-learning at Texas A&M is poised to thrive through intentional engaged scholarship opportunities. Students can complete a service-learning project as a high-impact experience described in the Quality Enhancement Plan (Texas A&M University, 2014).

Before additional service-learning opportunities are implemented, faculty members and graduate instructors must be trained to identify and appreciate the tenets of service-learning (Boyer, 1990; Britt, 2012; Eyler and Giles, 1999). Specific course examples should be read and understood by Communication faculty seeking to implement service-learning in their classrooms (Braun, 2001; Brower, 2011;

Charlesworth, 2008; Keyton, 2001; McKay & Estrella, 2008; Novek, 2009; Pearce & Pearce, 2001).

Issues of social justice and dialogue are critically important in Communication courses and theory. As such, we must understand how service-learning allows these actions to take place (Artz, 2001; Dempsey & Barge, 2013). By fostering dialogue as a means to challenge students to investigate their own beliefs, themes of social justice challenges will only strengthen the impact of students' experiences.

Next, I discuss the importance of taking part in development programs aimed at improving faculty and student experiences through service-learning. By participating in and contributing to Texas A&M's own Service-Learning Faculty Fellows program, faculty can connect curriculum with the institutional core value of selfless service.

Service-Learning Faculty Fellows Program

The Service-Learning Faculty Fellows (SLFF) program was created by the Leadership and Service Center and Center for Teaching Excellence to cultivate and sustain successful academic opportunities at Texas A&M. The SLFF program is a year-long faculty development program that provides an opportunity for selected faculty to integrate service-learning theory and practice into their teaching, research, and public service. In doing so, these faculty become campus and community leaders by engaging in service-learning pedagogy. This program also creates sustainable partnership opportunities among students, faculty, and community partners (Texas A&M University, 2014).

Dewey's (1916) vision for civic engagement included the importance of collaboration to involve students and faculty. At Texas A&M, the SLFF program exists to link faculty members with developmental opportunities to improve their own pedagogy and teaching practices. By implementing the faculty members' ideas in their courses, more and more Aggie students are beginning to experience the importance of service in both campus and online settings. This program continues to highlight Texas A&M's rich tradition of extracurricular leadership training (Texas A&M University, 2014). As a powerful form of experiential education, service-learning is an excellent way to teach Aggies while connecting them with meaningful, course-based work.

Texas A&M continues to foster civic responsibility through the promotion of services to support students in their academic and extracurricular endeavors. Each academic year, more departments are promoting the integration of classroom curriculum and learning. Schools steeped in a rich tradition of service, like Texas A&M, are uniquely positioned to cater their service-learning initiatives to students with a predisposition to serve.

Engaged Communication Scholarship

Furthermore, Communication scholars have a unique opportunity to develop engaged scholarship that creatively solves real world problems (Barge et al., 2008; Deetz, 2008; Dempsey et al., 2011). Important ethical considerations must be considered when planning these experiential learning experiences (Cheney, 2008; Kolb, 1984). By also understanding the critiques of engaged scholarship (Dempsey, 2010), Communication faculty are trained to succeed in their service-learning endeavors

(Gibson et al., 2001). By engaging in practical, real world problems, faculty can generate scholarship that makes a difference in the world (Hummert, 2009; Seeger, 2009; Timmerman, 2009). Reflection in service-learning courses must be utilized to connect students' experiences with personal meanings (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Lahman, 2012; Ribek, 2000). This important practice of translating scholarship will ultimately position the Communication field as a continued leader (Tracy, 2013; Trethewey, 2002).

As a teacher of COMM 210: Group Communication, I have supervised various service-learning projects that are required in the class. For example, one student in my Summer 2014 class collected student desks for a local children and women's shelter. These desks served as important equipment needed during after school mentoring and tutoring sessions. These students utilized their skills and knowledge as a group to complete the assigned projects while also linking their work to meaningful lifelong lessons regarding the importance of service to others. By meeting needs of their local community members, these students shared the lasting importance of how this course content will impact their lives. This information was shared in both a reflective portion of their final report as well as an oral presentation delivered to the entire class.

In summary, the Service-Learning Faculty Fellows program offers an exciting opportunity for Texas A&M faculty members to improve their teaching pedagogy. By also utilizing various forms of engaged scholarship for future best practices, Communication scholars are positioned as leaders for social change through transformative curricula. My personal teaching experiences to date highlight the value of service-learning implementation in Communication courses, and I advocate for its

continued use in future planning. In the following, I discuss the limitations and future directions for this research study.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. The first limitation is the sample used for interviewing. Given more time, I would expand the sample to include more executive student leader interviews from previous years. It would be especially interesting to investigate how storytelling has been used by student executives since The Big Event's creation in 1982. An expanded study could also include interviews with Big Event committee members and other key stakeholders. Resident interviews would also add another layer of understanding given availability and IRB issues.

With additional time, it would also be interesting to interview first time, one time, and returning student volunteers to tell their stories about how they make sense of the role of logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event. The overwhelming scope of this idea proved to be too extensive for this single study. For example, I wonder how the volunteers would explain their motivations to serve. By exploring how these motivations inform students to serve, program leaders can make necessary adjustments for future success. I would also further investigate the lack of criticism expressed by the student executives in the interviews. Revised interview questions could assist in answering why leaders do not fully address criticism.

Regarding the visual analysis, Twitter and Instagram proved to be difficult media to gather photos. Due to the nature of these social media outlets, photos are archived in different ways. As the researcher, it was sometimes hard to trace certain captions and

images after several weeks of posting dates. In the future, the media outlets should be expanded to accommodate these needs. I believe the variety of information presented by other media could possibly provide additional meaningful insights. These photos certainly warrant their own analysis in another study.

Qualitative research seeks to learn about specific people and events in a specific place at a specific point in time. I hesitate to label the following information as limitations of qualitative research, yet rather as constraints to the process. In fact, the limitations of the methodology are really the strengths that make it so uniquely powerful and meaningful. As with any type of constraint, researchers must find ways to play to the advantages and hindrances present in qualitative studies.

Since deep understandings are at the center of qualitative research goals and because the researcher is the instrument by which this knowledge is discovered, the data can be highly subjective. This subjectivity is signature of the method and is to be embraced and used constructively to generate deep understandings. Thick description is achieved by spending significant time in the field. Although this use of time can be viewed as a constraint, it actually allows for strong data and findings. The concern of bias is also evident in interpretive research, yet researchers want bias (Tracy, 2013). This is inherent in the nature of the researcher as the instrument. Also, accessibility to the participants can be denied or restricted. This urges researchers to balance participants' needs and wants with their own. This will create the need for managing unknown and wasteful timelines. Interpretive research results also cannot be generalized, used for broad conclusions, or to affirm Truths. That is the beauty of the research method. These

limitations define the interpretive paradigm and its messy, non-linear process (Tracy, 2013). In fact, these limitations are the strength and practicality of interpretive research.

Future Research

Although this study's findings seek to explain how The Big Event is constructed through narrative, future exploration is needed. In general, future research should focus on the power of continued storytelling for recruitment purposes. Specifically, by including more voices in the interview process, future studies could research narrative from the view of student participants. As The Big Event expands globally, other research could include a comparison of similar Big Events throughout the world.

Future studies could also focus on the tensions surrounding The Big Event. For example, issues of race and class should be addressed to understand how The Big Event is fulfilling the mission by serving all community members. By investigating the exact populations they are serving, extended outreach will be helpful for future growth and diversity. Just after I concluded this study, a current Big Event student leader in one of my courses mentioned the need for more diverse representation in future executive groups. I will follow up with this conversation, and I am excited about an extended study focused on this important facet of The Big Event and its continued success.

Furthermore, future analysis and research should also address the use of the mission statement as a way to say thank you to the community versus how it is largely playing out—as a way to serve and help the community. The way we understand and use history and institutional memory would also be an interesting way to approach a similar study.

Summary

This dissertation investigated how student leaders of The Big Event construct narratives that emphasize service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M. I uncovered through narrative and the use of storytelling how Texas A&M communicates the perceived importance of service and leadership and then translates this message with a day of service for the Bryan/College Station community.

During this project, I interviewed The Big Event student executives about their leadership experiences. Research question one asked how the student leaders of The Big Event construct a narrative that emphasizes service and leadership as core values at Texas A&M. Coding and analysis of interview data revealed the emergence of four dominant themes. These themes included personal leadership development, individual leadership philosophy, service-mindedness, and the role of Texas A&M traditions.

Research question two asked what is the role of narrative and storytelling in the logistics, preparation, and perpetuation of The Big Event for future improvements and expansion. Coding and analysis revealed the emergence of themes related to these three areas. Regarding logistics, the theme reported was the importance of best recruitment practices. Questions regarding preparation revealed the importance of valuable, skill-based experiences and the need for improved internal relations among student executives, committees, and volunteers. Responses relating to perpetuation included the need for articulating the vision for future expansion and strategic campus planning for national and international growth of The Big Event.

In my research, I connected the importance of civic learning to current understandings and research regarding the motivations of students who choose to serve. My findings suggested multiple, important theoretical and practical implications. Specifically, I employed qualitative research methods to cultivate understanding and recommendations for future best practices.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

1. Please describe your involvement with The Big Event.
2. How do you define leadership?
3. How do you define service?
4. What motivates you to serve through The Big Event?
5. What is your leadership philosophy?
6. Based on *The Servant* book the Executive Team has been reading this semester, what has resonated with you the most?
7. What have you learned about yourself while reading this text?
8. In your opinion, why does The Big Event exist?
9. Does tradition play a role in the continued efforts to sustain The Big Event? If yes, how so?
10. How will your experiences with The Big Event impact your life beyond your undergraduate career at Texas A&M?
11. How do you believe The Big Event can improve?
12. How has The Big Event impacted your life the most?
13. How do you defend The Big Event against negative feedback and/or comments?
14. How do you recruit potential first-time volunteers to serve through The Big Event?
15. How do you envision The Big Event twenty years from now?