

Military recruiters target schools strategically

By Charlie Savage, Globe Staff | November 29, 2004

POMFRET, Md. -- Military recruiting saturates life at McDonough High, a working-class public school where recruiters chaperon dances, students in a junior ROTC class learn drills from a retired sergeant major in uniform, and every prospect gets called at least six times by the Army alone.

...Now, as pressure mounts on recruiters to find 180,000 volunteers amid casualty counts from Iraq and Afghanistan that have surpassed 1,300 dead and 10,000 wounded, the fairness of the system by which the nation persuades young people to take on the burden of national defense is coming under increasing scrutiny.

The Globe inquiry found that recruiters target certain schools and students for heavy recruitment, and then won't give up easily: Officers call the chosen students repeatedly, tracking their responses in a computer program the Army calls "the Blueprint." Eligible students are hit with a blitz of mailings and home visits. Recruiters go hunting wherever teens from a targeted area hang out, following them to sporting events, shopping malls, and convenience stores.

Officers are trained to analyze students and make a pitch according to what will strike a motivational chord -- job training, college scholarships, adventure, signing bonuses, or service to country. A high-school recruiting manual describes the Army as "a product which can be sold."

The manual offers tips for recruiters to make themselves "indispensable" to schools; suggests tactics such as reading yearbooks to "mysteriously" know something about a prospect to spark the student's curiosity; notes that "it is only natural for people to resist" and suggests ways to turn aside objections; and lists techniques for closing the deal, such as the "challenge close":

"This closing method works best with younger men," the manual reads. "You must be careful how you use this one. You must be on friendly terms with your prospect, or this may backfire. It works like this: When you find difficulty in closing, particularly when your prospect's interest seems to be waning, challenge his ego by suggesting that basic training may be too difficult for him and he might not be able to pass it. Then, if he accepts your challenge, you will be a giant step closer to getting him to enlist."

Varying targets

The Defense Department spends \$2.6 billion each year on recruiting, including signing bonuses, college funds, advertising, recruiter pay, and administering the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. The military pitches the test to schools as a free career exploration program, but which its manual notes is also "specifically designed" to "provide the recruiter with concrete and personal information about the student."

Nearly all efforts are aimed at impending or recent high school graduates. But the marketing message is not targeted equally, acknowledged Kurt Gilroy, who directs recruiting policy for the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Although the military strives to maintain a presence everywhere "to give everyone an opportunity to enlist if they so choose," he said, it concentrates on places most likely to "maximize return on the recruiting dollar [because] the advertising and marketing research people tell us to go where the low-hanging fruit is. In other words, we fish where the fish are."

But targeting some schools more than others raises questions about fairness. While some stu-

dents at targeted schools are eager to join, others may be unduly manipulated into signing up.

David Walsh, a psychologist who has written a book about the impact of media on the adolescent brain, says teenage brains are not yet fully developed. Studies have shown that teens' brain structures make them less independent of group opinion and less likely to consider long-term consequences than adults a few years older.

For the masses of teenagers who are not peer group leaders, Walsh said, an aggressive sales pitch can sway their decisions -- especially if the recruiter knows how to get coaches, counselors, and popular students to endorse enlisting.

Indeed, the Army trains its recruiters to do exactly that.

"Some influential students such as the student president or the captain of the football team may not enlist; however, they can and will provide you with referrals who will enlist," the Army's school recruiting handbook says. "More important is the fact that an informed student leader will respect the choice of enlistment."

Walsh says an approach like this is certain to persuade some teens at targeted schools to join up, while essentially identical teens at other schools will make other choices.

"What we end up doing is maintaining the gap between the haves and the have-nots, because they are the ones who are targeted to put their lives on the line and make sacrifices for the rest of us," Walsh said. "The kids with more options, we don't bother with them."

Different paths

Principals and teachers play a role in determining whether military recruitment succeeds. In schools where educators are skeptical of the military, recruiters are shut out beyond the minimum required by President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act: two visits a year per service, as well as a list with every student's name, address, and phone number.

In other schools, the people who fill those same influential roles serve as advocates for the military.

At McDonough, guidance counselor Wanda Welch, who notes that her son recently completed four years in the Air Force, talks of the virtues of defending the country. Sitting near military posters and brochures, she says she appreciates the services recruiters give to the school and tells students that "if they don't know what they want to do, enlisting can be a good choice."

At McLean, counselor Isobel Rahn, who notes that she came of age amid the Vietnam War protests, says the school requires recruiters to sign in like any other outsider because "we protect our kids."

Sitting near a poster announcing visits from 23 colleges in the coming two weeks, she says she tells students that the military offers benefits but that "the con in 2004 is that you can get killed."

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(800) 394-9544
(574) 232-2295
GIRIGHT@YAHOO.COM