

FEATURE ARTICLES

# Reflection: Elevating Respect at a Senior Military College - A Case Study

David Keller, Texas A&M University

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

Maya Angelou <sup>1</sup>

Military Service Academies and Senior Military Colleges (SMC) share similar challenges—particularly when attempting to inculcate our core values in students across a four-year series of developmental experiences. Critical constructs such as honor, duty, selflessness, excellence, and courage must be taught, discussed, and practiced in order for students to serve with integrity after graduation. As Director of the Hollingsworth Center for Ethical Leadership for the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M University, my purpose for writing this article is to share how the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets has intentionally worked over the past three years to advance the core value of respect within our student cadets and staff. I will discuss our success, struggles, and current challenges.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/drmayaangelou/status/1028663286512930817?lang=en>

---

**Dr. Dave Keller** is the Director of the Hollingsworth Center for Ethical Leadership for the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M University. In this role, he oversees leadership and character development for more than 2,200 of Texas A&M's most visible undergraduate students. Prior to coming to Texas A&M, he culminated a noteworthy Air Force career by overseeing many cadet character and leadership development programs at the Air Force Academy. Dr. Keller also served as the Deputy Vice Commandant of the Academy, helping guide many of the Academy's organizational culture and climate change efforts. Dr. Keller holds an undergraduate degree in Human Behavior & Leadership from the Air Force Academy and a Master's Degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from St Mary's University in San Antonio. He earned his PhD from Texas A&M, where his primary research focused on moral and ethical development of leaders.

Having served previously on staff at a Military Service Academy (United States Air Force Academy) and currently on staff at a Senior Military College (Texas A&M University), I hope to offer a unique perspective on the particular challenges faced by each of these types of institutions:

- Our desired outcomes are similar, but not identical.
- Our developmental processes are similar, but different.
- Our contexts are similar, but palpably distinct.

In terms of similarities, both Military Service Academies and SMCs attract highly intelligent, motivated, service-oriented young people. Structure, discipline, bearing, and duty are demanded. Fitness is emphasized, celebrated, and assessed. Challenging academic coursework is the norm. Character development is uncompromisingly emphasized. Consequently, all graduates are expected to step into the world with a distinct institutional branding that follows them for the rest of their lives.

That said, both Military Service Academies and SMCs have profound vulnerabilities when it comes creating and maintaining a culture of respect with our student populations. Cadets at both types of institutions:

- (a) have disproportionate ratios of male and female cadets when compared to the broader national population (i.e., significantly more males than females);
- (b) have a profound power differential between cadets resulting from the cadet rank structure within their distinct four-class development systems;
- (c) are required to live in close proximity to one another much of the year within their respective cadet units (e.g., squadrons, companies, outfits,

etc.). As with any familial unit, the stressors that often accompany this extensive close contact can quickly turn toxic if members are not equipped with adequate coping skills;

- (d) are expected to consistently perform within high-stakes, high-stress environments; and
- (e) have substantial subcultures that can create unique ingroup/outgroup dynamics and potential biases.

Beyond these similarities, there are also very tangible differences between Military Service Academies and SMCs. One of the most significant of these is the career paths taken by graduates. For example, at Military Service Academies, every student attends with the full intention and foreknowledge of serving in the military upon graduation. Although their career fields and specific jobs may vary widely, every single attendee knows they will serve on active duty for at least the minimum time of their initial service commitment.

This is not the case at the SMCs. While all SMCs have a substantial commissioning population, we also have a percentage of students who will not enter the military upon graduation. For example, at Texas A&M, the Corps of Cadets commissions more officers annually than any other school in America outside of the Military Service Academies. That said, approximately 60 percent of the cadets in the Corps will not enter the military upon graduation. Instead, they will take the knowledge, discipline, and values gained from their Corps experience and step into potentially hundreds of civilian career fields. Furthermore, the Corps of Cadets is merely one student organization within the broader University, comprising only about four percent of the total Texas A&M undergraduate student population.

This reality poses a real challenge for our Corps, especially when attempting to advance the value of respect. For example, at a Military Service Academy, academic conversations about respect can be tailored

directly to the military context—classroom examples and case studies often come exclusively from military examples. Furthermore, if an especially egregious violation of respect were to occur, senior leaders at a Military Service Academy can address 100 percent of the students quickly and directly (readers may recall recent salient incidents at the Air Force Academy when the Superintendent addressed all cadets from the Staff Tower of the dining hall after an unfortunate event). Conversely, at Texas A&M, our senior leaders do not have this opportunity since our students have academic and University responsibilities that reach far beyond their Corps affiliation.

All of this serves as a backdrop for the remainder of this article. In the following paragraphs, I will explain our efforts at Texas A&M over the past three years to advance the core value of respect within both our students and staff. In order to do this, we will go back to the quote that began this essay from the brilliant poet and philosopher Maya Angelou – “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

### **“Do the best you can ...”**

The Texas A&M Corps of Cadets has a long and proud history of living out its mission statement to develop well-educated leaders of character prepared for the global leadership challenges of the future. Character, values, and integrity have always been a vital part of the Corps since the start of the University in 1876. We have historically brought in high-character students who allowed their Corps experiences to mold and shape them into citizens of impact for our state and nation. Through the years, Texas A&M Corps has produced astronauts, corporate CEOs, military general officers, and a state governor. Seven former cadets have received the Medal of Honor. Two Aggie generals have served as Commandant of the Air Force Academy (Patrick

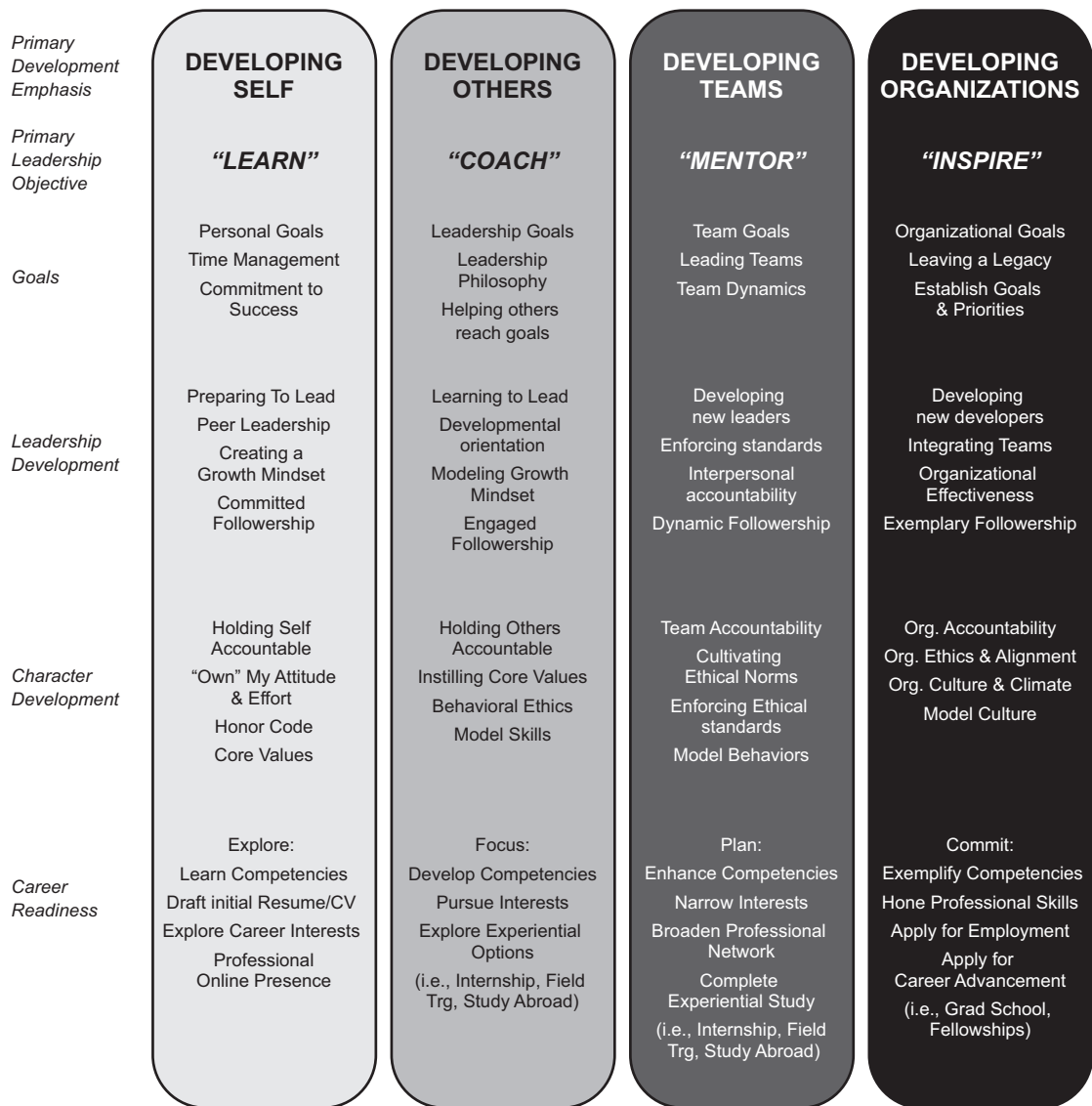
K. Gamble (1993-1994) and Gregory J. Lengyel (2012-2014). General Stephen Wilson (A&M Class of 1981) recently retired as the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

Unfortunately, over the past few years, we discovered that we were making a mistake that many organizations make: we assumed character development was happening, but we were not as intentional in the training, application, or assessment of our efforts. As a result, we discovered that we were becoming increasingly vulnerable to the phenomenon of ethical drift, where our lack of a unified focus on character development was becoming evident in a series of

*These efforts to “do the best you can” ultimately fell short of what we knew we could – and should – have been doing. We needed increased intentionality and alignment.*

incidents where cadets had missed the mark—at times egregiously—in terms of living out their character (Sternberg, 2012). We discovered that we had given the responsibility of teaching and developing respect to the student leaders within each of the 45 cadet outfits (similar to Air Force Academy squadrons). In short, the 45 cadet outfits were largely operating independently without true organizational alignment around a common unified purpose.

These efforts to “do the best you can” ultimately fell short of what we knew we could – and should – have been doing. We needed increased intentionality and alignment. We needed to stop assuming character development was occurring consistently across all 45 outfits, and take deliberate steps to ensure that it was occurring.

**Figure 1*****Corps Leadership Development Model (CLDM).*****"Until you know better..."**

One of the first things we did to improve our organizational alignment was the creation and development of a Corps Leadership Development Model (CLDM). This model was developed during the 2018-2019 academic year, in partnership with

the Hollingsworth Center, the ROTC detachments, graduate stakeholders, outside experts, and focus groups of dedicated cadet leaders.

The CLDM outlined a four-year progression of growth for all cadets around a framework of four stages: developing self, developing others, developing

teams, and developing organizations. These four headings largely corresponded with the freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior years, respectively, with each stage building upon the lessons learned from all previous stages. Further, within each stage, we outlined the leadership, character, and career readiness goals/outcomes for each phase of development.

The creation of the CLDM was a major starting point to begin taking a hard introspective look at the delta between where we were as an organization, and where the model inspired us to go. As a direct result of the internal conversations borne out of this process, it was determined that the value of respect was glaringly missing from the stated list of the Corps of Cadets core values. While respect may have been assumed, it was never overtly stated. Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the cadet discipline problems at that time seemed to center around issues regarding disrespect. Cadet leadership took steps immediately to add respect to the existing list of core values in 2019.

Adding respect to the list was a good initial step, but we knew it was insufficient to stop there. Memorizing a list of core values is obviously not the same as taking deliberate steps toward teaching, discussing, and behaviorally defining the term for our cadets. The aforementioned discipline cases coincided with several high-profile national events that piqued the conscious of American society. As a result, we decided to collect testimonies of respect—and disrespect—from targeted focus groups of cadets. Comments from these focus groups were quite sobering and indicated that, while we often looked good on the surface to outside observers, there were multiple indicators that we had significant work to do within some subcultures within the Corps.

We conducted additional anonymous culture/climate assessments and discovered similar patterns beyond just our focus groups. Trust is a byproduct of psychological safety, and we increasingly realized that

some of our students did not feel comfortable coming forward due to fear of emotional retaliation from other students. While this is an increasing phenomenon with today's students throughout the world, it was still disappointing to know that it was happening to our population as well.

### **"Then when you know better, do better."**

As we were confronted with data showing areas for needed improvement, we began working together across the Corps to begin to address these areas practically and deliberately. Despite the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we remained determined to take immediate steps to begin addressing these issues.

#### *Corps Conversations for Staff*

One of the first steps we took was to create small-group huddles within our permanent staff to discuss important—and often controversial—topics around race, gender, empathy, and political correctness. We created cross-functional small groups and required all members of the Commandant's staff to participate in monthly small-group discussions (initially via virtual platforms due to COVID-19 protocols). We chose to begin with the staff because (a) we knew it was important to lead by example, (b) we needed to be clear on these concepts before attempting to discuss them with our students, and (c) it would be naïve to assume we might not have respect gaps within our own staff.

#### *Corps Conversations for Students*

We created multiple opportunities for current cadets to hear from multiple panels of current and recently graduated cadets around topics related to respect, inclusion, and marginalization of team members. Current students listened as panelists shared their experiences—both good and bad. Cadets were then challenged to step out and make substantive changes to the internal cultures of their respective outfits and special units.

Figure 2

12 Career Readiness Competencies

<h2>Corps 12</h2> <h3>Career Readiness Competencies</h3>	<h3>Career Readiness</h3> <p>The attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare you to successfully transition into the workplace.</p>
 <h4>PROFESSIONALISM</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal accountability &amp; effective work habits</li> <li>• Consistently meet or exceed goals and expectations</li> <li>• Act with integrity and accountability to self, others, and the organization</li> <li>• Learns from his/hers mistakes</li> </ul>	 <h4>ETHICAL LEADERSHIP</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivate and inspire others by building mutual trust</li> <li>• Plan, initiate, manage, complete, and evaluate projects</li> <li>• Leverage strengths of self and others to achieve common goals</li> <li>• Use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others</li> <li>• Organize, prioritize, and delegate work</li> </ul>
 <h4>COMMUNICATION</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization</li> <li>• Can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively</li> <li>• Employ active listening, persuasion, and influencing skills</li> </ul>	 <h4>CRITICAL THINKING</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues</li> <li>• Make decisions and overcome problems</li> <li>• Gather and analyze information from a diverse set of sources and individuals to fully understand a problem</li> <li>• Demonstrate originality and inventiveness</li> </ul>
 <h4>CAREER &amp; SELF DEVELOPMENT</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify &amp; articulate skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position</li> <li>• Identify areas necessary for professional growth</li> <li>• Navigate and explore job options</li> <li>• Understand how to advocate for opportunities in the workplace</li> </ul>	 <h4>TEAMWORK</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimize mission accomplishment within a team structure</li> <li>• Listen carefully to others, taking time to understand and ask appropriate questions without interrupting</li> <li>• Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse viewpoints</li> <li>• Negotiate and manage conflict</li> </ul>
 <h4>TECHNOLOGY</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage existing digital technologies ethically and efficiently to solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals</li> <li>• Demonstrate effective adaptability to new and emerging technologies</li> <li>• Navigate change and be open to learning new technologies</li> </ul>	 <h4>RESPECT &amp; INCLUSION</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity</li> <li>• Respect and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions</li> <li>• Solicit and use feedback from multiple cultural perspectives</li> <li>• Actively contribute to inclusive and equitable practices that influence individual, organizational, and societal progress</li> </ul>
 <h4>ADAPTABILITY</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize and adjust to unforeseen circumstances</li> <li>• Maintain flexibility in complex situations</li> <li>• Modify plans to accomplish predetermined goals</li> <li>• Overcome obstacles</li> </ul>	 <h4>RESILIENCY</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recover from setbacks or failure</li> <li>• Mentally and emotionally cope with crisis</li> <li>• Protect oneself from the potential negative effects of stressors</li> <li>• Grit and determination to elevate above circumstances</li> </ul>
 <h4>PHYSICAL &amp; MENTAL WELLNESS</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life</li> <li>• Self care, stress reduction and the development of inner strength</li> <li>• Maintain optimal body structures and functions through healthy food intake, physical activity and exercise, sleep health, and proper hydration</li> </ul>	 <h4>FINANCIAL LITERACY</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand and properly apply financial management skills</li> <li>• Make informed and effective decisions with financial resources</li> <li>• Create and maintain personal and organizational budgets</li> <li>• Protect economic value with appropriate financial risk management</li> </ul>



***Intentional Leadership Conference***

The Hollingsworth Center for Ethical Leadership hosts an annual multi-day Intentional Leadership Conference (ILC) each year for cadets. In 2021, the theme was modified to be about respect in multiple settings (i.e., respect in the workplace, respect in relationships, respect in teams, etc.). In 2022, the ILC theme is moral courage, and participants will discuss multiple dimensions of how to courageously take action in life, to include confronting inappropriate behaviors and attitudes within organizations.

***Revision of our Career Readiness Competencies to Include “Respect and Inclusion”***

The Corps of Cadets has 12 Career Readiness competencies that we emphasize for both commissioning and non-commissioning cadets (e.g., critical thinking, teamwork, professionalism, communication, etc.; Figure 2). One of those competencies was previously entitled *Global and Intercultural Fluency*. During our focus groups, we discovered that most cadets thought of that competency in terms of being courteous when traveling outside the United States. Consequently, in 2021, we modified that competency to be *Respect and Inclusion* in order to better train cadets that respect for other cultures does not have to be exclusively overseas, but, rather, it is often most powerfully displayed by the respectful appreciation of others within one’s own organizational unit.

***Creation of a Rising Commanders Course***

Student cadet commanders are a force multiplier when it comes to organizational culture. We determined that our efforts to train and guide these new student leaders was largely ineffective regarding organizational culture and climate. All new student cadet commanders will now be required to take an academic commanders course as part of their weekly studies. Part of the curriculum for that course is the creation, maintenance, and cultivation of a respectful organizational culture and climate. Assignments will include assessment

of individual outfits and creation of action plans to address emerging issues.

***Increased Emphasis on Mental Health Services***

One of the things our team discovered is that our students had unique challenges regarding mental and emotional health. As such, we sought help from national experts and the counseling services on our own campus. We trained all staff on warning signs and created new cadet positions to help listen, identify, and refer hurting students to appropriate helping agencies.

***Create Sustainable Processes to Assess and Evaluate Efforts***

Assessing constructs such as respect or character, more broadly, is challenging. We have found that it works best when using multiple data collection techniques like using qualitative and quantitative methods. We then search for recurring themes or trends, rather than basing decisions on anecdotes – regardless of how salient a single anecdote might be. Through quantitative climate surveys, cadet qualitative focus groups, former cadet panels, staff focus groups, and other methods, we were able to determine our initial steps and most urgent areas of immediate focus. Over time, the intent is to become more organizationally consistent with these efforts to be able to explore changes over time, conduct both formative and summative evaluations of our programs, and identify emerging issues much faster. One of the first steps in this process is that the Hollingsworth Center for Ethical Leadership will be hiring an Associate Director for Assessment in Integration to begin work this coming fall semester.

***Conclusion***

Throughout the past several years, it has become increasingly clear that institutions of higher learning across America are quite often challenged to meet the fresh societal demands of developing young leaders with a high capacity for respect for human dignity. Military Service Academies and SMCs are not immune to these challenges. While we share some unique advantages in

this fight, we also share some sobering vulnerabilities that can often make this effort quite treacherous.

The purpose of this essay has been to illuminate one organization's ongoing journey to deliberately improve efforts in this critical area. It has involved taking a hard look internally, asking tough questions of our stakeholders, and ourselves, and taking deliberate steps to move forward collectively as an organizationally aligned team. One of our important next steps will be to improve the evaluation and assessment of our efforts.

We do not claim to be the paragon of perfection when it comes to these topics. However, I hope I have conveyed our sincere commitment to intentionally improve and grow. The Corps of Cadets is the oldest and most recognized student organization at Texas A&M. We take very seriously our charge to lead our university regarding our character, values, and leadership. To that noble purpose, we are committed to identifying issues and holding ourselves accountable for the creation of a better—and more respectful—Corps in the future.

To paraphrase Dr. Angelou...

*We were doing the best we could, but our data showed we needed to do better.*

*Now that we know better, we must continue to take bold steps to do better!*

♦ ♦ ♦

## Reference

Sternberg, Robert J. (2012). Teaching for Ethical Reasoning. *International Journal of Educational Psychology (IJEP)* Vol. 1, No. 1, February 2012 pp. 35-50.