

## ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

# Thriving at the U.S. Air Force Academy

Kevin Davis, United States Air Force Academy

Daphne DePorres, United States Air Force Academy

Sonia Esquivel, United States Air Force Academy

Claudia Ferrante, United States Air Force Academy

Scott Heyler, United States Air Force Academy

David Levy, United States Air Force Academy

Gary Packard, United States Air Force Academy

Eric Tucker, United States Air Force Academy

Elizabeth Blair, United States Air Force Academy

The stated mission of the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is “to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become leaders of character, motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our nation.” To accomplish this mission, Air Force leaders must create a system that produces experiences that will lead to this goal. More specifically, since the Air Force Academy is a military college, leaders must create events in three areas—military, academic, and athletic—that move students (cadets) toward the overall goal. While many such events are currently employed to engage cadets, distinct objectives and metrics for these events are sometimes unclear.

Academic assessment at the Academy has a long track record, with outcomes that are clearly stated, and regular course and program reviews. Recently, the leadership at the Academy established an office of Assessment and Research to extend assessment into the military aspects of the Academy’s mission. Over the next few years this office will build a robust set of objectives and metrics for military training events. Similarly, the Athletic Department provides reports annually on its activities. Academic departments are also engaged, as the metrics of each academic program are periodically reviewed in order to continuously improve the effectiveness of program outcomes.

Against this backdrop of the current state of assessment at the Academy, and in the spirit of continuous improvement, we suggest there is a need for a meta-level of assessment, which will help assess specific training events

as well as the meta-outcome of the overall program: the development of leaders of character. In particular, we will examine the strengths of two higher level objectives: surviving and thriving. Through the lenses of surviving and thriving, and assessment of the status of each, Academy leadership can develop insights to better accomplish the mission.

We start by defining *surviving and thriving*, then demonstrate how thriving is fundamentally driven by the three elements of self-determination theory. This is followed by a set of propositions inviting assessment and continuous improvement. Next, we present a series of scenarios that illustrate the differences between surviving and thriving contexts. Finally, we provide a roadmap for assessing the level of thriving at the Academy, for both individual cadets and the overall program.

## Surviving and Thriving Defined

### *Survival as an Objective.*

We define survival as the goal of continued professional existence where the situation is dangerous or extremely stressful. In the survival state, a person is subverted from the pursuit of their full potential to cope with the situation at hand, and are unable to fulfill the innate psychological self-determination needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Instead, the focus is on “getting by,” “making it through,” “not getting into too much trouble,” “feeling overwhelmed,” and sometimes, “going through the motions.” Surviving can also include the development of persistence and grit, the willingness to pursue a difficult goal for long periods of time (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2015).

While some of the descriptors of surviving may sound negative, USAFA’s emphasis on surviving is

---

**Kevin J. Davis**, Ph.D., is a professor of management at the United States Air Force Academy. He earned his MBA and DBA from Harvard University. Dr. Davis has published in a variety of journals including the Journal of Investments, Financial Services Review, Information and Management, Human Factors, and the Journal of Leadership Studies. He previously served as an Air Force pilot, completing 28 years of service.

**Daphne DePorres**, Ph.D., is a Professor of Management in the Doctoral Programs of Management and Computer Science at Colorado Technical University. For the academic years of 2017-18 and 2018-2019 she is a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Air Force Academy. She has extensive experience as an OD educator and practitioner, including positions as program director of the Master’s Degree in Organization Development and associate professor in the business school at the University of Monterrey in Monterrey Mexico. Dr. DePorres has an MS Organization Development from Pepperdine University and a doctorate in education from Pepperdine University’s Organization Change program. Dr. DePorres also served as Vice President of Research, Development and Organizational Effectiveness at Los Angeles Universal Preschool, an organization dedicated to ensuring pre-school education for all qualified. Her research interests include developing innovative qualitative research methods and exploring the opportunities represented by linking action research and leadership education.

**Sonia Esquivel**, Ph.D., is an Academic Advisor and Professor of Spanish at the United States Air Force Academy. Dr. Esquivel has been actively involved in the diversity and inclusion at USAFA and she is an active member of the Making Excellence Inclusive Committee. Since 2013, she has escorted cadets on cultural and language Immersion summer trips to Chile, Mexico, and Spain. Dr. Esquivel received her doctorate in Counseling and Student Development from Kansas State University. Her current research involves sense of belonging and diversity & inclusion. Her research has been included in the training for academic advisors and at new faculty orientation.

essential. During intense programs such as Basic Cadet Training, Cadet Survival Training and Recognition (a training event culminating in first-year cadets being ‘recognized’ as members of the Cadet Wing), cadets learn to cope with seemingly impossible demands where key skills such as decisiveness, rapid prioritization, and teamwork are developed and enhanced.

Situations and exercises using survival as a goal can also create powerful camaraderie and a strong sense of relatedness (Achor, 2015). For organizations that face real survival situations, such as the military or law enforcement, it is natural to want to ensure that members are used to handling stress. Unfortunately, this can lead to an overreliance on survival types of training activities, which reduces opportunities

for overall leadership development and growth, as explained below. When in survival mode, participants must make trade-offs that get in the way of achieving realizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which, as we will discuss, are critical for the effective warfighter and leader.

While survival exercises can produce very positive outcomes in terms of relatedness and a feeling of accomplishment, under the wrong circumstances, or when survival becomes a continual goal, the result is often cynicism, apathy, and disengagement. For example, studies have shown that unhealthy amounts of time dedicated to playing video games are often a result of avoidant response to frustrated thriving needs (Wu, Lei & Ku, 2013). Further, under conditions

---

**Claudia Ferrante**, Ph.D., is a Professor of Management at the United States Air Force Academy. She graduated from Bucknell University in 1988 with a B.S. in Biology and earned her MBA and Master of Health Administration from the University of Pittsburgh, in 1990. After working as a management consultant for an international accounting firm, the Assistant Director of Finance at a hospital, and as a financial analyst for a health maintenance organization, Dr. Ferrante received her doctorate in Organizational Behavior from Carnegie Mellon University. Her current research interests include applying organizational behavior and human resource management to service-learning, experiential learning and corporate social responsibility.

**Scott Heyler**, Ph.D., Colonel, U.S. Air Force, is the Head of the Department of Management at the United States Air Force Academy. He graduated from USAFA in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in management. He has served in the Air Force for over 25 years and is a career personnel officer. Col Heyler has held leadership positions at the squadron, group, wing, major command and air staff levels and in the joint environment. He served as the Air Officer Commanding for Cadet Squadron 29 at USAFA from 2007-2009. He received his Ph.D. in Management from Auburn University in 2014. He has served across the United States and overseas in Germany and Afghanistan. His research interests are in the areas of ethical decision making and organizational leadership. He has published articles in *The Leadership Quarterly* and *The Journal of Managerial Issues*. He teaches courses in the areas of organizational leadership, power and influence and business ethics.

**David Levy**, Ph.D., is a Professor of Management at the United States Air Force Academy. He graduated from USAFA in 1988 with a bachelor's degree in psychology and served ten years on active-duty. After leaving the military, he worked as a senior marketing manager for America Online and as an organizational change consultant for Grant-Thornton and KPMG. Dr. Levy received his doctorate in organizational behavior from Cornell University applying principles from cognitive psychology to organizational theory. His current research involves developing cognitive maps of effective leadership. Dr. Levy is a co-author of four books, *The 52nd Floor: Thinking Deeply About Leadership*, *Attitudes Aren't Free: Thinking Deeply About Diversity in the US Armed Forces*, *Echoes of Mind: Thinking Deeply About Humanship*, *Evolution of Government Policy Towards Homosexuality in the US Military*, and most recently, *The Line: A Very Short, Short Story*.

where survival is the continual goal, participants can develop a harmful type of relatedness that is contrary to organizational, and proper individual goals. This can manifest as a loyalty to one another that overwhelms loyalty to the organization. Rules infractions, even integrity lapses, can be overlooked. In academics, a continual focus on survival can lead to cramming for exams instead of engaging with the material. Students who are deprived of thriving needs often want no academic feedback at all, other than survival information such as knowing the mean (average on a particular assignment) and how their score will translate into a grade.

In summary, under many training situations, survival is an essential and worthy goal. However, for

many contexts and situations, a prolonged survival focus produces negative results, reducing cadet growth toward becoming a leader of character.

### *Thriving as an Objective.*

Thriving is experienced as a sense of growth, learning, and momentum, and is accompanied by a sense of being energized. Individuals who are thriving are not “merely surviving” (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998; as cited in Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012, p. 251) “or getting by” (Benson & Scales, 2009; as cited in Porath, et al., 2012, p. 251). Thriving is composed of two dimensions: vitality and learning (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). These dimensions represent the affective (vitality) and cognitive (learning) elements required for the

---

**Gary A. Packard Jr.**, Ph.D., Colonel, U.S. Air Force, is Vice Dean for Curriculum and Strategy and a Permanent Professor at the U.S. Air Force Academy, CO. He has also served the Academy as the Vice Dean of the Faculty and as the Permanent Professor and Head of the Behavioral Sciences and Leadership Department. He commanded the 32nd Flying Training Squadron at Vance AFB, OK, served as lead U.S Air Force writer on the Secretary of Defense’s study of the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and deployed as the Director of Staff, 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, Southwest Asia. Col Packard has a BS in Behavioral Sciences from the Air Force Academy, an MAS in Aeronautical Science from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, an MA in Counseling from Michigan State University and a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a command pilot with 3,900 flying hours.

**Eric Tucker**, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management at the United States Air Force Academy. He received his Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering and Management Systems from the University of Central Florida in 2010. He received a B.S. in Aeronautical Engineering from the United States Air Force Academy (1994), M.S. in Engineering and Technology Management from Oklahoma State University (2002) and a M.A. in National Defense and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (2007). Eric is a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel and has been on the faculty of the United States Air Force Academy for eight years and was on the faculty of the University of Denver for two years. His current research involves the improvement of organizational performance and management systems using analytics.

**Elizabeth A. Blair**, Captain, U.S. Air Force, is an instructor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado. She is responsible for the instruction and development of over 100 cadets annually and aids in preparing them to be officers of character. Additionally, Capt Blair serves as the undergraduate research director leading the senior capstone seminar for more than 120 faculty and cadets in the department. Captain Blair is a 2010 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in behavioral sciences and leadership. She has held a variety of assignments as a behavioral sciences officer in the Human Performance Wing. Prior to this assignment, she was a graduate student at the University of Maryland, where she earned a Masters of Arts degree in sociology.

psychological experience of personal growth (Porath, et al., 2012). When a person has vitality, they are enthusiastic about their tasks, and look forward to each day (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Nix, Ryan, Manly & Deci, 1999; both as cited by Porath, et al., 2012). Individuals who are thriving feel more vital, which results in more enthusiasm and a deeper reservoir of positive energy (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Multiple experiments have demonstrated that vitality results in performance improvement, while also accelerating recovery from personal fatigue (Muravan, Gagné & Rosman, 2008, as cited by Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). The learning dimension of thriving involves a commitment to continuous learning as well as the application of knowledge which is congruent with current Air Force guidance which notes that airmen must develop the skills to personally “assess and adjust, or calibrate their environment” to “maintain the cognitive skill, physical endurance, emotional stamina” needed to maximize mission accomplishment (AFI 90-506). It follows that those who are thriving build new capabilities (Carver, 1998, as cited by Porath, et al., 2012) by applying what they have learned. Additionally, vitality and learning combine in a manner that increases thriving and reduces burnout (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

In contrast to surviving, thriving focuses on the development of internal motivation, which could help cadets to invest in and actualize their potential, as well as internalize institutional core values. In summary, put in the context of USAFA, individuals who are thriving are intentionally engaged, which results in personal growth and an additional sense of vitality (Robitschek, 1998, as cited by Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), while reaching desired states as defined by the mission of USAFA. Hence, creating activities, situations, or events where the intentional goal is thriving will likely result in the development of cadets who look for challenges and are motivated to maximize their competence—cadets who can be expected to perform better every day.

Studies exploring the context of thriving find that individuals who score higher on the thriving scales/metrics we discuss later, are more motivated and perform better than those who are not thriving. Consider these examples: Black and Deci (2000) show that, in terms of overall learning, university instructors get superior results when they create a thriving context; a study at a medical school demonstrated that students are much more likely to internalize desired institutional values when taught within a thriving context (Williams & Deci, 1996); and hospital patients were significantly more likely to change their behaviors and embrace a healthier lifestyle when health care providers used methods that emphasized thriving (Williams, Deci, & Ryan, 1998).

Thriving has also been strongly linked to leadership effectiveness and leadership development. In a study of executives across different firms, thriving leaders were rated substantially better, and found to be better role models, than those whose thriving score was lower (Porath, et al, 2012). In addition, research has shown that leaders who support increased autonomy in the workplace enhance employee well-being and workplace effectiveness (Slemp, Kern, Patrick & Ryan, 2018).

Since thriving as a goal is critical under circumstances that demand personal growth or internalization of values, such as the Air Force Core Values, when designing programs and training events at USAFA we recommend that leaders intentionally create and assess training that provides opportunities for cadets to thrive. Thriving doesn't occur just because the boss is pushing for it (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Instead, research has demonstrated that thriving is situationally dependent—the roles, responsibilities reporting relationships, and task constraints all determine whether a situation produces thriving, or instead, depletes vitality (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

## Linking Thriving to Self-Determination

### Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), a theory well supported by empirical work, postulates that cognitive and emotional health are a function of the satisfaction of three needs (Flannery, 2017), which act to support the ability of a person to exercise their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are, in turn, critically dependent on the context provided by an organization's leaders (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As described in this section, the three components of self-determination theory provide the *nutriments* required for thriving (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). For example, studies have shown that students that were provided with the three nutriments of self-determination theory possessed more vitality (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000, as cited by Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

### The Components of Self-Determination Theory

As mentioned above, SDT is scaffolded by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The first of these, autonomy, is evident when a person commits to his or her actions and takes responsibility for them (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Motivation that is autonomous reflects actions that flow from the person's values, goals and interests (Graves & Luciano, 2013). Autonomous action is pursued by individuals who have enthusiasm for the matter at hand accompanied by a sense of choice (Gagné & Deci, 2005), a combination that is necessary for peak performance (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Autonomy has been associated with self-actualization and self-esteem and leads to supporting the autonomy of others (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005). Studies have also repeatedly found that "motivation and perseverance are necessary for attainment of eminent performance" (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; p366).

The need for competence is driven by the desire to impact one's surroundings and to own one's

actions through the development of skills, mastery of challenges, achievement of goals and adaptation to evolving environments (Graves & Luciano, 2013). Competence is achieved via a commitment to learning, which is the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills to build capacity (Edmonson, 1999 as cited in Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

Satisfaction of the relatedness need is indicated by close and secure personal relationships (Flannery, 2017). As a result of the experience of relatedness, individuals feel connected to others, believe they are an important and well-regarded member of social groups, and see themselves as able to contribute to both individual relationships and to the groups where they are members (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

When autonomy, competence, and relatedness are optimized, individuals are better able to successfully interpret threatening situations that are out of alignment with their values (Di Domenico, Liu, Ayaz, & Fournier, 2016). As a result, such individuals are better able to handle the challenges that accompany rigorous education and training processes. Individuals operating with high levels of self-determination are simply better prepared psychologically to face and manage challenging situations, and they are much less likely to ignore or avoid problems, which can lead to troublesome behaviors that get in the way of effective functioning (Li & Yang, 2016).

Self-determined individuals have a desire to grow and develop, to expand their potential, and to be an active part of the social structures in which they reside (Graves & Luciano, 2013). When self-determination is driven to higher levels (i.e., when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are in full force) psychological resilience, which is a person's capacity to face difficult situations, is increased, and that person is able to thrive. As a result, self-determined individuals are better able to recover from intense formational processes (Booth &

Neill, 2017), such as those employed by USAFA, while maximizing and integrating the knowledge gained from those processes.

### Thriving, Self-Determination, and Academy Mission Accomplishment

We observe that most cadets thrive in at least one area of their life at the Academy. While a cadet may be struggling academically, they may be thriving as a cadet squadron commander. Perhaps another cadet thrives in his or her academic major but struggles militarily. Some cadets thrive on the athletic fields, others in cadet clubs. The challenge for USAFA permanent party (i.e., our military, academic, athletic and character development faculty and staff) is to make thriving and/or surviving intentional objectives for particular training and educational events which might then widen the window of thriving opportunities for cadets and further contribute to the accomplishment of the Academy's mission.

The research cited above strongly suggests that activities that focus on thriving are critical to cadet

*...the Academy must provide contexts and situations where cadets work to reconcile experiences, facts, or events that contradict their current self-concept, which results in personal growth...*

development, particularly when compared to activities that focus on survival alone. As discussed, this is especially important for leadership development, where we have long known about the importance of giving participants time reflect on their personal leadership challenges (Conger, 2004) while exploring, incorporating and understanding of the rationale behind their Academy experiences. A critical element of cadet development is expressed by The Air Force Academy's Officer Development System

which specifically explicates a desire for officers who "have internalized a foundational identity, in which they understand why...service...is a noble pursuit." (USAFAPAM 36-3527, 2013, p. 11). Further, there is little doubt that the USAFA mission requires cadets to internalize the Air Force Core Values (Integrity First, Service Before Self, Excellence in All We Do). This requires training focused on thriving, not just survival or "getting by."

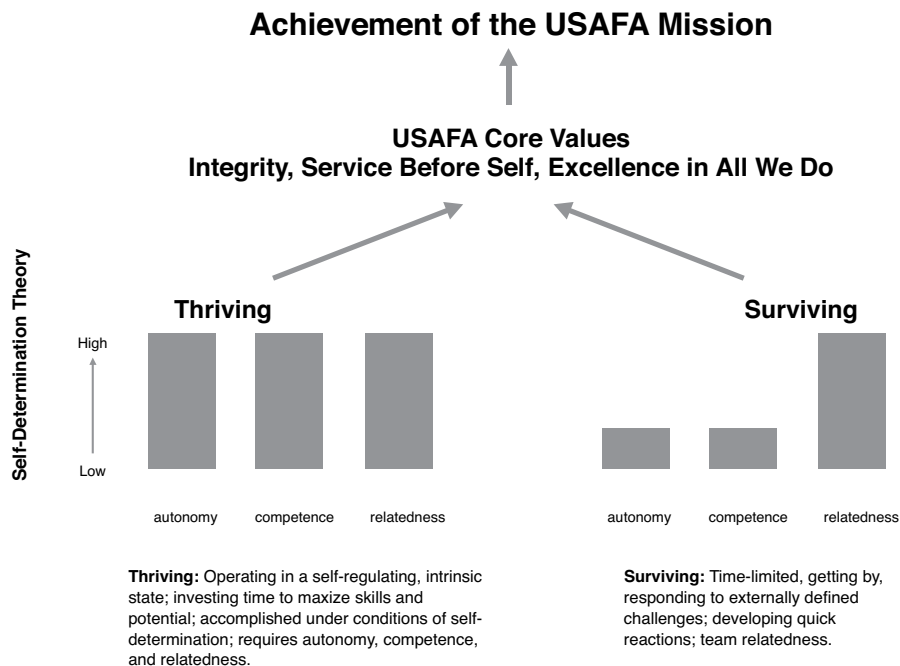
The Academy's Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) has defined development as "the crystallization and consolidation of new insights, knowledge, observable skills and responsibilities" (CCLD, 2011, p. 12) The Center acknowledges, in agreement with theories of thriving, that training and education don't, by themselves, lead to deeper insights (CCLD, 2011). CCLD refers to Bandura's (1997) work, which underlines the need for individuals to believe in their ability to perform, while operating in an encouraging environment. Finally, again in agreement with self-determination theory and thriving, CCLD notes that when people undergo real development

it is not because something is "done to them" (CCLD, 2011, p. 17). Instead, the CCLD calls for the creation of events and an overall system wherein

cadets "own" their personal development—which is a fundamental aspect of thriving.

Integrative processes are essential to the accomplishment of the USAFA mission. CCLD (CCLD, 2011) refers to this as intentionally "threading together" a cadet's experiences. Further, they call for "experiences and relationships that are sustained over time and meaningful to the individual" (CCLD, 2011, p. 18). This means the Academy must provide

Figure 1



contexts and situations where cadets work to reconcile experiences, facts, or events that contradict their current self-concept, which results in personal growth (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2013).

DiDomenico, et al., (2016) posit that when values, practices, and behaviors are in congruence with the various dimensions of a person’s identity, that person begins to perceive that they are operating in a self-regulated state. This is critical because growth and internalization are maximized when a trainee perceives that they are acting in a self-regulated state (derived from the SDT focus on autonomy). This requires the intentional creation of a thriving context. Rogers (1961) reminds us, however, that these processes do not result in a permanent self-concept but are part of an ongoing process of discerning and consolidating the self. Further, thriving must be emphasized in each Academy functional area (i.e., military training, academics, athletics, and character development). Shin and Grant (2019) warn that if the ability to thrive is

not equal in all areas, it can result in poor performance in the areas that have neglected to provide a thriving context.

As supported by the discussion above we submit four propositions:

**Proposition 1:** The mission of USAFA will be more comprehensively met if the organization provides a clear context and objectives for training and educational events that correlate with the nine institutional outcomes of USAFA (critical thinking; clear communication; application of engineering methods; scientific reasoning and the principles of science; the human condition; cultures & societies; leadership, teamwork, and organizational management; ethics and respect for human dignity; national security of the American Republic; warrior ethos as airmen and citizens).



**Proposition 2:** Cadets will be more productive in their efforts to become leaders of character if the contexts and objectives, emphasizing either surviving or thriving, are intentionally applied in each development situation.

**Proposition 3:** Driven by autonomous motivation, cadets who are thriving will better internalize the values of the Air Force and, as a result, will be more committed to live by those values.

**Proposition 4:** USAFA permanent party largely controls the extent to which each training or development event or context is experienced by the cadets as a thriving or surviving situation.

The above model briefly illustrates our previous discussion of thriving and surviving as they relate to the achievement of the USAFA Mission (Figure 1). At the end of this paper we will discuss methods to assess both individual events and the overall cadet experience to determine the extent to which Academy cadets are thriving.

### Scenarios: Thriving or Surviving

To further explore self-determination theory as it relates to surviving and thriving at USAFA, we present six scenarios depicting surviving and thriving situations which were provided by cadets and graduates, followed by a discussion of the relationship between the scenario and SDT.

#### *Scenario 1: Surviving and Academics*

On your way to teach in Fairchild Hall at USAFA, you see a familiar cadet. As the distance closes, you recognize Cadet Jones. “Hi Cadet Jones! How are you doing?” You and Cadet Jones shake hands and move to the side of the bustling hallway.

“Hi Ma’am. It’s good to see you!”

Cadet Jones was one of your students and it has been months since you last saw her. As you recall, she applied herself after stumbling in the first half of your course and ended up with a decent grade. She’s an upperclassman now, and you expect her to tell you all is well.

Cadet Jones says, “I’m okay. Surviving.” She looks off into the distance. “I had two tests today. I think I passed them. Prog [mid-term grading period] is right around the corner though. Lots to do. Oh, and I leave for a game this weekend. You know how it is.”

“Yeah,” you say. As a USAFA graduate you remember how overwhelmed and stressed you were almost all of the time.

Cadet Jones continues, “I gotta run. My study group is meeting in the library in 10. I’m hoping the extra effort will help me get off of academic probation. Maybe, I’ll even learn something.”

Academic probation? Cadet Jones? “Hang in there. Only two years until graduation and you made it through the toughest two years.”

“Yes ma’am. That’s what I keep telling myself.”

Wow, my response was weak, you think. Hang in there. Live through it. Just survive.

*Commentary for Scenario 1:* For anyone who has observed cadets at USAFA, this scenario familiar. While the majority of cadets don’t experience academic probation, at multiple points in their cadet journey cadets experience the overwhelming reality of seemingly unending commitments that push them toward an emphasis on survival: academic pursuits, squadron duties, athletic team practices and games, extracurricular activities, military training, and the many other obligations. This scenario isn’t just familiar, it’s normal; de rigeur as part of the four-year USAFA

experience in the quest to produce not only combat ready warriors but leaders of character who will be at the helm of the U.S. Air Force and civilian organizations, as they have been since the first class graduated in 1959. This type of environment is driven by the assumption that not everyone can survive, but those that do will be better because of it and will be prepared to fulfill the unique mission of the USAFA.

If you check in with USAFA graduates from across the years, you'll find that the fundamental assumptions about training haven't changed much since the first cadet, Bradley C. Hosmer, received his diploma. Some of the basic assumptions have been challenged over time, as evidenced by dramatic changes in retention and graduation rates, and discussions about the need for multiple pathways. However, the fundamental philosophy and the assumptions we make, whether conscious or unconscious, of what an Air Force Academy is or should be, remain largely unchanged and are reflected in the summation of the cadet experience in this scenario: survive.

As briefly discussed above, Permanent Party understand that defending the country and fighting wars is the military's primary role. In response, we want to insure our cadets can survive under pressure—so we push them to their limits to get them ready. For many Permanent Party members of USAFA we've talked to about training cadets, this is as it should be. USAFA has a long history of success that tells us we are doing something right. When Cadet Jones and her peers toss their hats on graduation day, they will know they are survivors. They made it through the countless obstacles and challenges built into the cadet experience. They will be proud that they made it through a program that few others would or could; forged in fire, emerging as warriors.

However, as important as the outcomes are from exposing cadets to survival situations, we propose that we can produce more developed leaders of character

by finding ways to encourage a thriving outcome as well. Let's hit the reset button on the scenario above and look at a different interaction; one seen through a thriving lens.

### *Scenario 2: Thriving and Academics*

On your way to class in Fairchild Hall at USAFA, you see a familiar cadet; someone you hadn't seen in months. As the distance closes, you recognize Cadet Jones. "Hi Cadet Jones! How are you doing?" You and Cadet Jones shake hands and move to the side of the bustling hallway.

"Hi Ma'am. It's good to see you!"

Cadet Jones was one of your students. As you recall, she applied herself after stumbling in the first half of the course and ended up with a decent grade. You expect her to tell you all is well. She's an upperclassman now.

Cadet Jones says, "I'm tired, but am doing really, really well. We just finished a design project for my capstone course, and it turned out great. Honestly, I had my doubts about getting it done, but our team gelled about midway through and we came up with a design our instructor told us has never been done before and has the potential to impact our field." She looks off into the distance. "Funny thing though, at the beginning of the semester I dreaded the class. Frankly, I thought this would be the one class I might fail. And here I am, I'm loving it and working harder than I ever thought I would... or could."

As a USAFA grad you smile at the similar experiences you went through as a cadet. Challenging assignments; direct, yet constructive feedback; room to make and correct mistakes.

Cadet Jones continues, "I gotta run. My study group is meeting in the library in 10. I usually prefer studying on my own, but this particular group pushes me to do more than I would normally do alone, and I appreciate that."

The best part of teaching is watching cadets like Cadet Jones thrive. “I’m so excited for you! The Air Force is incredibly lucky to have you and I can’t wait to see what you accomplish after graduation.”

“Thanks, ma’am. It was great running into you.”

**Commentary for Scenario 2:** The second scenario was quite different from the first even though they both depict experiences at USAFA. In the first scenario, the cadet was simply trying to get by, to survive. But consider—isn’t simply surviving a rather odd goal or criteria for success? Imagine a farmer stating that they want their crops to survive rather than thrive. A farmer does their best to provide the optimal balance of nutrients that support abundant harvests. In contexts where the possibility for substantial additional growth exists, a survival goal sets the bar much too low. In the second scenario, these nutrients appear to be present and the cadet thrived. We must prepare cadets for actual survival under fire, which the Academy does quite admirably through intense programs such as Basic Cadet Training and Cadet Survival Training. However, if we make survival a day-to-day goal throughout a cadet’s time at USAFA, we neglect growth and miss opportunities in many areas that require investment and reflection.

### *Scenario Three: Surviving in the Cadet Wing*

Let’s take a look at another scenario, again using the lens of SDT, to identify how the cadet in the scenario perceives her levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others.

“This has to stop,” the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) told his cadet squadron commander. “I’m sick and tired of low knowledge test scores, bad uniforms, and poor attitudes. Lead your squadron, or I’ll do it for you.”

The cadet squadron commander sighed and said, “Yes, Sir. I’ll take care of it. It won’t happen again.” Run the squadron? He’s already running the squadron. I haven’t been able to make a single decision on my own since the sophomores did poorly on their knowledge test at the beginning of the semester. Did he even think about why they did poorly? No! They’re probably upset and sending a message to you about micromanaging them as much as you’re micromanaging me. I’m stuck in the middle yet again. Forty-four days. Yes, I’m counting down. Forty-four days until the next sucker gets to be squadron commander and ‘not be in charge.’”

“Don’t squander this leadership opportunity,” the AOC continued. “I expect to see a huge improvement in your squadron’s performance.”

“Yes, sir. I won’t let you down.”

**Commentary for Scenario 3:** The scenario above might seem a bit contrived, but it conveys what some cadets have shared with us semester after semester. As previously stated, Self Determination Theory tells us that adequate levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be perceived for a person to experience subjective well-being and to thrive. With that in mind, it is fairly easy to imagine what the cadet in the scenario perceived regarding autonomy, competence and relatedness. Let’s take autonomy first. Recall that autonomy involves a sense of volition and choice. Clearly, this was lacking in the scenario. The cadet expressed frustration about not being able to make decisions and being micromanaged. Imagine how proud that cadet must have been about her selection as squadron commander and how much she must have looked forward to the opportunity to practice her leadership skills.

When it comes to SDT, competence is about more than simply having a skill. Competence is about successfully applying skills when faced with significant

challenges. Critically, it is also about the growth of the competency through practice. In the scenario, the cadet isn't given the opportunity to develop or use her competency. Instead, she is relegated to implementing the directives given by her AOC.

The third component of SDT, psychological relatedness, has to do with relationships that support a sense of belonging and connection to others. The AOC could have used the opportunity to mentor the cadet, share wisdom, and develop mutual respect that would bolster the sense of relatedness, but it does not look like this was happening in this case.

Interestingly, the AOC may not be thriving either. The AOC job, embodying both evaluation and mentorship is extremely difficult and, depending on the metrics used to judge their performance, AOCs may find themselves focusing on day-to-day survival. If so, the approach taken by the AOC, applying pressure and creating a survival context, is understandable. Unfortunately, because growth was possible in this scenario, making this a survival situation stunts that growth, and could easily result in cadets choosing loyalty to one another over the mission.

#### ***Scenario 4: Thriving in the Cadet Wing***

"Hey, Ma'am. Do you have a minute?" Cadet Jonas, the cadet squadron commander said as he knocked on the AOC's office door.

She put aside the papers she'd been reviewing. Bout time for a break. "Come on in, have a seat. What can I do for you?" the AOC responded.

Cadet Jonas took a seat and asked, "Well, I'm concerned about the poor performance of the sophomores on their last knowledge test and was wondering if I could bounce a few ideas off of you?"

Yes! She'd been hoping that the cadets would stop by more often and ask for her guidance. "Of course. I don't have all the answers, but I'm happy to share my

experience with you." The AOC leaned back in her seat. I better set up some clear ground rules though. "Ultimately, after I share my thoughts, the best course of action is your decision. And if you make a mistake, we'll learn from it." She was concerned her words might be taken as an empty promise, or worse, a veiled threat, but she firmly believed that USAFA is a leadership laboratory where cadets can make mistakes and learn from them in an environment where no one gets hurt.

They went on to brainstorm ideas. Time passed without either of them being aware of it. When they were done, Jonas said, "I think I've got some great strategies that will work. Thanks, Ma'am. I appreciate your time. "I can't believe how much I'm learning."

The AOC closed with two suggestions. "Cadet Jonas, next time consider bringing along one or more of your staff to participate in our meeting. Decisions can be substantially improved when discussed with others, especially those who will be asked to implement or live with the final decision. Also, whenever time allows, be sure to ask for feedback from your staff before making a final decision. That will ensure everyone has a voice and knows their positions are valued."

They both chuckled as the AOC walked Cadet Jonas to the door.

*Commentary for Scenario 4:* This scenario tells a very different story than the previous scenario. While the situation may be similar, the AOC is consciously or unconsciously using the power of SDT to promote thriving. Let's start with autonomy. In this scenario, the AOC makes it very clear that the cadet squadron commander has the autonomy to make decisions. Cadet Jonas is also invited to develop additional competence, with the AOC providing mentorship in a non-threatening, non-survival environment. Jonas seems genuinely excited about the opportunity.

In the scenario, the cadet squadron commander values and appreciates his interactions with his AOC. The AOC demonstrates respect for the cadet, and in response the cadet is excited to share his ideas with his AOC. There is significant potential for a meaningful relationship between the two that meets the innate psychological need of relatedness as described by SDT. Further, the AOC has reminded the cadet of the importance of extending autonomy, competence, and relatedness to his staff.

Notice that the differences in the two scenarios are actions, policies and relationships that either foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness or reduces these elements. Promotion of a positive environment can take more time for an AOC, but has huge positive impacts in perceptions, behaviors, and ultimately outcomes.

### ***Scenario 5: Surviving in Multiple Systems at USAFA***

The previous examples focused on academics and the Cadet Wing as specific and distinct mission elements. Unfortunately, although it has utility, these scenarios are overly simplistic when viewed from the cadet perspective. Cadets experience pressures from the various mission elements at the same time and find themselves in a balancing act where prioritization and time management is an ongoing part of cadet life. To properly address this complexity through a SDT lens, a systems approach is necessary. Here are two scenarios that illustrate how this might look from a systems perspective.

“Hi Kevin, how are you doing? How are things going on the Hill?,” asks Kevin’s coach.

“Coach, things are not going so well. Every time I get back to the squadron I am reprimanded for missing the training sessions. When I do attend the training

sessions, I receive flack about not participating in the physical activities. I am told I am a slacker because I won’t do physical training with my classmates even though my cadet chain of command knows I am not allowed to participate under NCAA guidelines. It’s hard to balance my cadet responsibilities and my responsibilities to the team.”

The coach said, “Well Kevin, your cadet training staff is not helping us win any games. I recommend that you stay at practice until academic call to quarters [a time set aside each evening to allow student to study where there are no other events planned] starts; it’s only six months until recognition. Besides, you’re not good at any of that cadet stuff anyway. Tell you what, I will have the Head Coach call your AOC and tell her to leave you alone. We have games to win.”

Kevin doesn’t quite agree with the coach. I am pretty good at my knowledge, but I wish there was a way I could balance all my commitments. I feel like a disappointment. I wish my coach understood. I wish my squadron understood. I am not going to quit now, but if this balancing act doesn’t get any better, I need to find a way to maintain my sanity.

*Commentary for Scenario 5:* From a SDT viewpoint, the above scenario is painful to recount. Reading between the lines we can make some assumptions. For example, while Kevin was probably recruited for being a great athlete, he also demonstrated academic and leadership excellence during his high school years. Unfortunately, early in his cadet career, Kevin is already experiencing mutually exclusive mission element demands. As a result, his autonomy is under attack, and he is made to feel incompetent. As discussed above, though he wants to excel everywhere, Kevin may soon become defensive with some of the mission elements, reducing his participation, motivation, and growth.

One can imagine from the above scenario that this

cadet has pockets of strong relatedness with others, likely stemming from relationships with his teammates. It is also easy to imagine that his experience in his squadron makes him feel isolated, misunderstood, and alone. However, while Kevin's relatedness needs may be satisfied, the outcome for the Academy is suboptimal since the establishment of cliques can be contrary to the overall mission.

Kevin also has little chance to develop competency related to his non-athletic duties, given conflicts within the system. This inability to balance demands placed on him by different mission elements directly attacks his sense of competence. One can imagine his tremendous sense of pride as he performs on the athletic field, a sense of pride that is crushed when he is counseled for missing training events. This cadet could be confident in athletics, academics and military activities, yet the combination of all three have left him with an overall sense of being incompetent regarding the unified USAFA experience. This is not a great position to be in as a young person desiring to grow and excel.

### ***Scenario 6: Thriving in Multiple Systems at USAFA***

"Hi Kevin, how are you doing, how are things going on the Hill?" asks Kevin's position coach.

"Coach, things are going great. When I get back to the squadron, my three-degree coach checks in with me to see how the day went, including practices. She makes sure I understand all the requirements I missed and helps me develop a plan to support my role in the squadron even though I spend a lot of time down here.

The coach nods, happy to hear evidence that the parts of the system are working together to support Kevin.

Kevin continued, "My classmates are supportive as well. It's like I'm a part of two great teams. I'm working my butt off, but life is great." He adjusts his loaded backpack.

The coach knew that what Kevin experienced was, in part, a result of the great conversation that the Head Coach had with the AOCs to clarify the support cadet athletes need and what they contribute to USAFA.

"Additionally, I have felt appreciated more," Kevin said, "Now that my squadron knows what my day looks like, they now focus more on what I bring to the table and understand why I am unable to attend some squadron activities. With the support I am receiving from the military side and the athletic side, I feel like I can be successful at USAFA."

"Kevin, I am glad to hear all that. I am glad we were able to share all the good things you accomplish in your sport and dispel some of the myths. Thank you for sharing your concerns about balancing your Academy commitments. Like you, I am thankful for all the increased support. It's much easier for us to coach, and for you to play, when we are on the same team."

*Commentary for Scenario 6:* This scenario embodies the satisfaction of the innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in spades. Even though the cadet still deals with huge time management concerns, he can develop plans that help him meet both military and athletic requirements. Once his chain of command better understood his challenges and contributions, they were able to provide him additional autonomy.

Competence includes both actual skill and perception of that skill. In this case, the cadet feels as though he is making, and being recognized for, valuable contributions in both military and athletic pursuits. As a result, we can expect his autonomous motivation, his desire to make a difference, increase.

When the cadet says he feels as if he is a part of two great teams, he is voicing his sense of relatedness with two sets of people; his squadron classmates and

his teammates. Compare this to the isolation he was experiencing in the prior scenario.

### A Call for Action and Assessment

The leaders in any system are that system's architects and the behaviors observed in any system are a direct result of the architecture (processes, incentives, assumptions, etc.) within that system. Hence, leadership determines the degree to which any event will emphasize surviving and/or thriving. To do so intentionally requires the specification of each event's objectives in advance, as discussed in the introduction, along with specific metrics to measure outcomes.

Fortunately, as architects of the USAFA experience, USAFA leadership is ideally situated to create an environment where cadets can either thrive or be challenged to survive. To accomplish this, rigorous assessment of individual programs must be conducted in order to establish a baseline understanding regarding the elements required for cadets to thrive. We propose using The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (Chen et al., 2015) as an assessment tool. The scale has been validated in four countries and is designed to measure the extent to which the nutrients of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are present regarding a particular program or experience. Using the scale, cadets would be asked to reflect upon different aspects of their USAFA experience. For example, a cadet might take the survey to ascertain her experience as a flight commander in her squadron, again as a member of the volleyball team, and again as a major in the management department.

In the service of creating leaders of character, results should provide a measure of thriving as it relates to USAFA's mission, providing evidence that a cadet has maximized his or her potential as indicated by survey results, showing a robust level of perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. If the results are lower than desired, leaders (and all Permanent Party), as architects of the system, can take action and make

changes that can be expected to lead to increases in autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The results of those changes could then be measured by a later administration of the scale, after action has been taken to assess whether the changes impact cadets' ability to thrive. Isn't that what we all truly want for them and what they likely want for themselves?

It is critical at a military institution like the Air Force Academy that we develop a system that balances opportunities to thrive with those that teach students to survive. Officers in the Air Force need to understand what it means to thrive and how to help others to achieve that state. Additionally, these officers must understand what it takes to survive challenging situations, to persevere through adversity and to have the grit necessary to achieve challenging long-term goals. In this paper, we seek to find the correct balance of thriving and surviving. Too much of one or the other is detrimental to officer development. If we deliberate in our development of programs and in their assessment, we can achieve a highly effective system that produces officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force.

♦ ♦ ♦

### References

- Achor, S. (2015). The right kind of stress can bond your team together. *Harvard Business Review*, December, 2-4.
- Air Force Instruction (AFI 90-506). (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.ramstein.af.mil/Portals/6/documents/DTC/AFD-151216-016.pdf?ver=2016-04-14-155129-117>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.
- Black, A. E., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The effects of instructors' autonomy support and students' autonomous motivation on learning organic chemistry: A self-determination theory perspective. *Science Education*, 84(6), 740-756. doi:10.1002/1098-237X(200011)84:6<740::AID-SCE4>3.0.CO;2-3

- Booth, J. W., & Neill, J. T. (2017). Coping strategies and the development of psychological resilience. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education, 20*(1), 47-54.
- Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD), (2011). Developing leaders of character at the United States Air Force Academy: A conceptual framework. Retrieved from: <https://sharepoint.usafa.edu/centers/ccld/ia/SitePages/Home.aspx>
- Chen, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Beyers, W., Boone, L., Deci, E. L., Duriez, B. Lens, W., Matos, L., Mouratidis, A., Ryan, R. M., Sheldon, K. M., Soenens, B., Van Petegem, S., Van der Kaap-Deeder, J., & Verstuyf, J. (2015). Basic psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and need strength across four cultures. *Motivation and Emotion, 39*, 216-236.
- Conger, J. A. (2004). Developing leadership capability: What's inside the black box? *Academy of Management Executive, 18*(3), 136-139. doi:10.5465/AME.2004.14776188
- Di Domenico, S. I., Le, A., Liu, Y., Ayaz, H., & Fournier, M. A. (2016). Basic psychological needs and neurophysiological responsiveness to decisional conflict: an event-related potential study of integrative self processes. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience, 16*(5), 848-865. doi: 10.3758/13415-016-0436-1
- Duckworth, A. L., & Eskreis-Winkler, L. (2015). Grit. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 10*. (pp. 397-401). Oxford: Elsevier.
- Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R., & Tesch-Romer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review, 100*(3), 363-406.
- Flannery, M. (2017). Self-determination theory: intrinsic motivation and behavioral change. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 44*(2), 155-156. doi: 10.1188/17.ONF.155-156
- Gagné, M. (2003). The role of autonomy support and autonomy orientation in prosocial behavior engagement. *Motivation and Emotion, 27*(3), 199-223. doi: 0146-7239/03/0900-0199/0
- Gagné, M., & Deci, E. L. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26*, 331-362. DOI: 10.1002/job.322
- Graves, L. M., & Luciano, M. M. (2013). Self-determination at work: understanding the role of leader-member exchange. *Motivation and Emotion, 37*(3), 518-536. doi: 10.1007/s11031-012-9336-z
- Lewis, M. A., & Neighbors, C. (2005). Self-determination and the use of self-presentation strategies. *Journal of Social Psychology, 145*(4), 469-489.
- Li, M., & Yang, Y. (2016). A cross-cultural study on a resilience-stress path model for college students. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 94*(3), 319-332.
- Porath, C., Spreitzer, G., Gibson, C., & Garnett, F. (2012). Thriving at work: Toward its measurement, construct validation, and theoretical refinement. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 33*, 250-275.
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: a therapist's view of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Mariner Books.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 68-78.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. New York: The Guilford Press. Kindle Edition
- Shin, J., & Grant, A. (2019). Bored by interest: How intrinsic motivation in one task can reduce performance on other tasks. *Academy of Management Journal, 62*(2), 415-436.
- Slemp, G. R., Kern, M. L., Patrick, K. J., & Ryan, R. M. (2018). Leader autonomy support in the workplace: A meta-analytic review. *Motivation and Emotion, 42*(5), 706-724. doi:10.1007/s11031-018-9698-y
- Soenens, B., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2005). Antecedents and outcomes of self-determination in 3 life domains: The role of parents' and teachers' autonomy support. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*(6), 589-604. doi: 10.1007/s10964-005-8948-y
- Spreitzer, G. M., Sutcliffe, K., Dutton, J., Sonenshein, S., & Grant, A. M. (2005). A socially embedded model of thriving at work. *Organization Science, 16*(5), 537-549.
- Spreitzer, G. M., & Porath, C. (2014). Self-determination as a nutriment for thriving: Building an integrative model of human growth at work. In M. Gagné (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Work Engagement, Motivation, and Self-Determination Theory* (pp. 245-258). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.



- USAFAPAM 36-3527. (2013). The officer development system: Developing officers of character. Retrieved from: <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/usafa/publication/usafapam36-3527/usafapam36-3527.pdf>
- Weinstein, N., Przybylski, A. K., Ryan, R. M. (2013). The integrative process: New research and future directions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(1), 69-74. doi: 10.1177/0963721412468001
- Williams, G. C., & Deci, E. L. (1996). Internalization of biopsychosocial values by medical students: A test of self-determination theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(4), 767-779.
- Williams, G. C., Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1998). Building health-care partnerships by supporting autonomy: Promoting maintained behavior change and positive health outcomes. In A. L. Suchman, P. Hinton-Walker, & R. Botelho (Eds.), *Partnerships in healthcare: Transforming relational process* (pp. 67-87). Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Wu, A. M. S., Lei, L. L. M., & Ku, L. (2013). Psychological needs, purpose in life, and problem video game playing among Chinese young adults. *International Journal of Psychology*, 48(4), 583-590. doi:10.1080/00207594.2012.658057