

THE CENTER FOR CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY: WHY THIS, WHY NOW?

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Character and leadership development are indispensable to the development of military officers. This article discusses the processes that led to the creation of the Air Force Academy's Center for Character and Leadership Development. The article describes the three main changes the new Center will bring to the Air Force Academy: cutting edge scholarship and research in character and leadership development; a renewed focus on developmental curriculum for faculty, staff, and cadets; and a new emphasis on institutional integration of leadership and character development curriculum and programs. A description of a new building for the Center and a roadmap for the way ahead are also provided.

*To educate a person in mind and not in morals
is to educate a menace to society.*

- Theodore Roosevelt

Great organizations understand their passion along with their capabilities and constraints (Collins, 2001). There is little question that the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is passionate about developing leaders of character for the nation. You find the words "leadership" and "character" embedded in and emblazoned on almost every aspect of the institution. The mission statement of USAFA is "to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character

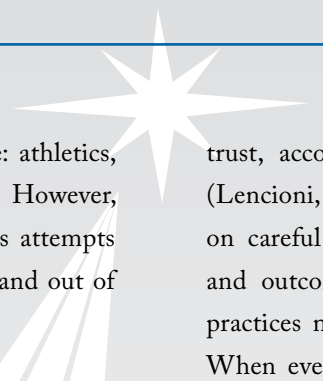
motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our Nation" (United States Air Force Academy Strategic Plan, 2008, p. 3). However, the toughest question for any organization is the question of "How?" How does an organization direct its people and its resources to accomplish its mission? At USAFA, the question is, "How does USAFA align its resources, people, and time to become a world leader in developing leaders of character?"

Historically, the faculty, staff, and cadets at USAFA have worked independently or in stovepipes in support of the mission at the Academy. Many have tried to integrate efforts

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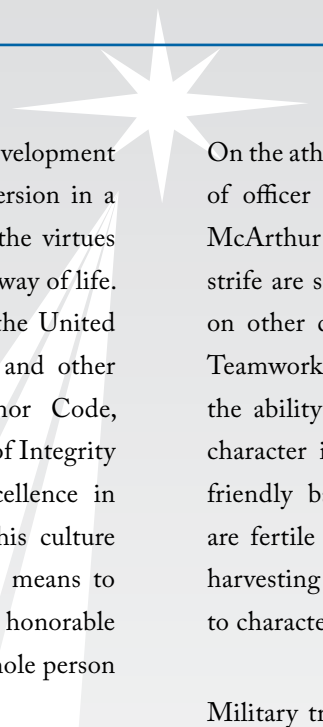
across the many aspects of cadet life: athletics, character, military, and academic. However, many of these efforts were grassroots attempts that faded away as people moved in and out of the Academy.

In the fall of 2009, USAFA stood up the Center for Character & Leadership Development (CCLD) under the Commandant of Cadets. The purpose of the CCLD is to integrate cutting-edge scholarship and world-class programs across every aspect of cadet life at USAFA during the four year journey of cadet development. USAFA, like most large organizations, deals with bureaucratic inertia that is often hard to overcome. This Center is designed to integrate and align people and programs in a way that overcomes the inertia and sets a new course for the institution.

Many times organizations seek to unify themselves around a meaningful institutional goal similar to the USAFA mission. However, institutions often lack the commitment needed to see the task through to completion because things are “good enough” and there is little motivation to change. As Collins notes, *good* is often the enemy of *great*. Moving from good to great is a team effort. Effective teams require commitment, healthy conflict,

trust, accountability, and attention to results (Lencioni, 2002). These team dynamics rely on careful study of organizational capabilities and outcomes. Organizational resources and practices need to align with desired outcomes. When everyone in the organization is aligned with the organizational goal and working in an integrated fashion to accomplish the mission, great things are likely to happen. The new Center is designed to facilitate these tasks.

Developing the character and leadership of cadets is foundational to officer development at USAFA. It is the job of everyone at the Academy and there are many programs that are aligned with the goal of developing officers of character. For example, the CCLD conducts several dynamic annual character development programs, but they are really just booster shots. In reality, most leadership and character development takes place in cadet peer groups, interactions with faculty and staff, daily training, and job responsibilities that build the right habits in cadets. These habits are the foundation for a lifelong process of learning to be persons of character who will do the right thing in all the roles they will fulfill in life—including being parents, spouses, commanders, and perhaps civic or business leaders after they leave the Air Force.



A unique component of this officer development process at the Academy is the immersion in a culture of honor designed to instill the virtues of trust and living with integrity as a way of life. This sets the military academies in the United States apart from most universities and other commissioning sources. The Honor Code, reflecting our Air Force Core Values of Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do, is the foundation of this culture and helps cadets internalize what it means to be professional airmen. However, honorable living is but one component of the whole person concept of officer development.

Another component of officer development is academic education. All cadets earn a Bachelor of Science degree as part of the requirements to be a commissioned officer. Often, the academic work the cadets complete is seen as separate and distinct from the military aspects of officer development, almost like a box to check off on the way to a commission in the Air Force. However, as General David Petraeus (2007) has written, “The most powerful tool any soldier carries today is not his weapon, but his mind” (p. 116). Integrated liberal arts education is a critical part of the integrated officer development journey that has its roots in the thinking of our first full-time Dean, General Robert McDermott (see Rigenbach, 2006, for General McDermott’s story).

On the athletic fields we find another component of officer development. As General Douglas MacArthur stated, “Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory.” Teamwork, esprit de corps, sportsmanship, and the ability to handle defeat and failure are all character issues worked out in the context of friendly battle. Therefore, the athletic fields are fertile grounds for sowing, cultivating, and harvesting the benefits of an integrative approach to character and leadership development.

Military training also plays a key role in cadet professional development. Character outcomes of discipline, courage, leadership, respect for human dignity, and followership are all honed in the dormitories and on the training grounds at the Academy. In many ways, the peer-to-peer interactions that occur in the cadet military hierarchy do as much, if not more, to shape the professional development of our students as any other activity at the Academy.

Along with all these components of professional development, cadets are involved in extracurricular activities, community service, and spiritual development. When all is said and done, the opportunities to develop leadership and character are almost endless. However, these activities,

classes, and programs often lack an integrating theme or purposeful developmental road map to guide the four year cadet journey. There is a complexity and richness to the opportunities, but sometimes the form and function are lacking.

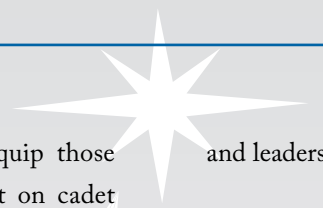
Our graduates leave here with an officer's commission and a prestigious Bachelor of Science degree. We put enormous effort into achieving those two milestones, but we are left with these questions when they throw up their hats in Falcon Stadium on graduation day:

- Will they pass the character tests they will surely face as officers?
- Will they be able to “connect the dots” from all the components of the character and leadership development opportunities available to them?
- Will we be able to assess the impact of our training on their performance as commissioned military officers?
- Under pressure, will they choose *the harder right* and have the moral courage to carry out what they know are the right decisions, even when those decisions involve paying a high personal price?
- When faced with a tough decision, will they balance the requirements of the mission with the needs of their people?

Anecdotally, our graduates do very well upon graduation. However, can they do better? Everyone at USAFA has a stake in making sure they will, but there needs to be an integrating force that pulls all the pieces together. That is the vision of the new CCLD. This is why the new Center is the right idea at the right time.

The original Center for Character Development, established in the mid 1990s, was a strong organization full of passionate, talented people. The original Center focused its efforts in two main areas: conducting world-class character seminars and symposia and assisting cadets in administering the cadet honor system. However, the Center lacked the resources and personnel to be a catalyst for institutional integration or to do cutting edge assessment and research to evaluate the impact of their programs. As a result, it never truly achieved its full potential.

The emphasis on being great practitioners and executing individual programs were, in fact, limitations to growth in character development at the Academy. The Center's programs were not well-integrated with each other, let alone with the rest of USAFA's curriculum. They were not well-grounded in sound theory or solid research, and the programmatic changes were not based on robust assessment and analysis. Finally, the



Center was not doing enough to equip those who have by far the greatest impact on cadet officer development—the faculty and staff who interact with cadets daily—with the tools and knowledge they need to make those daily experiences positive and developmental.

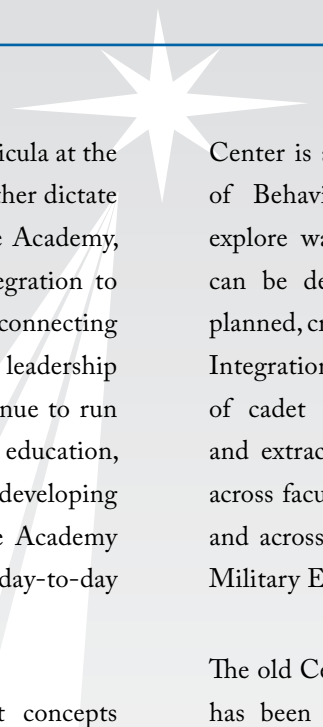
The Center was in need of a transformation. Guided by the vision of Dr Ervin Rokke (Lt Gen, USAF, ret), the Superintendent's Endowed Chair for Character & Leadership, a new Center was envisioned based on two major initiatives. Second, establish a research agenda that could inform institutional decisions and publish cutting-edge work in character and leadership development. In essence, while leadership programs and character programs have always existed at USAFA, they have never been truly integrated or assessed. This is why we have made the transformation to the CCLD.

There are three primary initiatives involved in this transformation. The first initiative is adding the capacity for meaningful research, assessment, and analysis. No process can be systematically improved unless it is well understood. The research CCLD undertakes will be focused on learning what works best in officer development. The Center's research will be applied research that will develop best practices in hands-on character

and leadership development.

This goal of understanding how educational programs directly influence character and leadership development is not new. In 1894, Schallenberger published what is probably the first study in the moral development of children. In the 1920s Hartshorne and May (1928 - 1930; May & Hartshorne, 1925) used tests measuring honesty, honor, and truthfulness in a major empirical effort concentrating on the development of instruments for use in the field of moral and religious education (see Leming, 1997, for a good review). These early studies focused on the practical application of research to address desired outcomes of moral and religious education. Likewise, research in the Center will follow in the tradition of applied research in the social sciences and humanities to better understand the real impact of training and education on the development of character and leadership at the Air Force Academy.

The second major initiative in the Center is to develop faculty, staff, and cadet competencies in the character and leadership domains. Since most character and leadership development takes place in routine, daily interactions—not in the Center's capstone events—it is critical that these daily events be complementary and



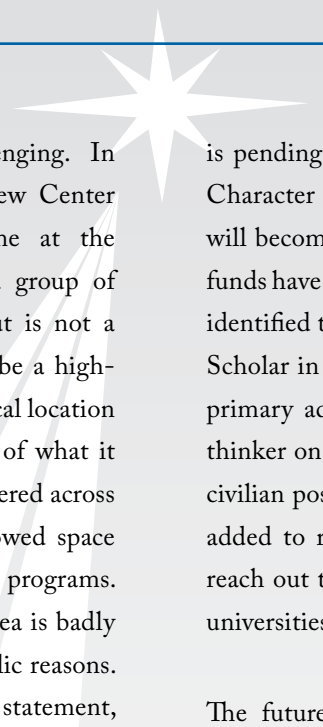
synchronized with programs and curricula at the Academy. While the Center will neither dictate nor run most of the programs at the Academy, it will be a voice of purposeful integration to assist faculty, staff, and cadets in connecting the many stars in the character and leadership constellation. Center staff will continue to run world-class programs and honor education, but will do so with an eye toward developing all people assigned to the Air Force Academy in both the classroom and their day-to-day interactions.

Finally, the related, interdependent concepts of leadership and character must be studied, explored, and exploited in a way that capitalizes on the clear synergy to be gained by integrating efforts across the Academy. Integration must occur on many levels. Leadership and character programs must become inextricably linked. CCLD has already begun integrating leadership development into its programs. The new Third Class¹ Responsible Officership Performance Enhancement Seminar (ROPES) emphasizes interpersonal and team leadership development as groups of sophomore cadets tackle challenging low and high events at the outdoor Adventure-Based Learning course. The goal of this course is to tie leadership and character development together in a transparent and integrated way. The

Center is also partnering with the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership to explore ways education and training curricula can be developed, delivered, and assessed in planned, cross-disciplinary courses and activities. Integration must occur across the four years of cadet development, across core curricular and extracurricular activities, across squadrons, across faculty and cadet development programs, and across USAFA and Air Force Professional Military Education boundaries.

The old Center's focus on stand-alone programs has been replaced by a focus on how those programs fit into the larger cadet experience. This transformation in how we think about character and leadership development will need to extend beyond of the Center walls and into the rest of the Academy. Programs across the Academy will need to be more intentionally connected to other developmental opportunities throughout the curriculum. Of the CCLD's three focus areas of integration, research, and developing people, this focus on developing a culture of integration will have the highest "return on investment" in terms of impact on cadet, faculty, and staff development because it will leverage all of the countless daily interactions in cadets' lives into meaningful developmental experiences.

¹ At USAFA, sophomores are referred to as "third classmen."



The way ahead is exciting but challenging. In addition to changing culture, the new Center hopes to build a permanent home at the Academy. The current Center is a group of people and a series of programs, but is not a place. Ideally, such a Center would be a high-impact organization as well as a physical location that would attract attention because of what it represented. CCLD is currently scattered across several locations and must use borrowed space (including off-base) for most of its programs. A new facility located in the cadet area is badly needed, for both practical and symbolic reasons. A separate CCLD facility will make a statement, both internally and externally, about USAFA's commitment to character and leadership development as the indispensable foundation of officer development. Current plans call for such a facility to be built just south of Arnold Hall, the cadet social center, with groundbreaking in early 2011 and completion in the summer of 2012.

This transformation into CCLD is still in its early stages. In reality, CCLD's standup on 1 Oct 2009 represents an Initial Operating Capability with Full Operating Capability (FOC) still a few years ahead. We must build up our embryonic scholarship capabilities and add new staff positions. The Senate confirmation process

is pending for the first Permanent Professor of Character and Leadership Development who will become the Center's next Director. Private funds have been granted and a candidate has been identified to potentially become a civilian Senior Scholar in Residence who will be the Director's primary advisor and the CCLD's top strategic thinker on scholarship. Additional military and civilian positions with specific expertise must be added to reach FOC, and a future capacity to reach out to the rest of the Air Force and other universities is planned.

The future is bright but our journey is only beginning. As stated earlier, culture change in large organizations is difficult and true change takes time, patience, and persistence. The fact that things are "good" at USAFA can create roadblocks in moving us toward sustained greatness. However, there is no mission at the Academy more important than the development of character and leadership in cadets, faculty, and staff. An old adage at the Academy states that we graduate two classes each spring. The first class is composed of the thousand or so cadets who are just beginning their careers as Air Force Second Lieutenants. The second class is composed of the hundreds of military faculty and staff who are completing their tours at the Academy and rotating back to their career fields

in the Air Force. It is inevitable that both classes have been changed by their time at the Academy. It is imperative that each person, regardless of which class, walks in to his or her next duty station with a clearer sense of what it means to be an officer of character in the United States Air Force.

The officers and civilians who are touched by the leadership and character development opportunities at the Academy will undoubtedly pass along to others the lessons they have learned, both good and bad, to the people they work with in other contexts. If we do our job right, they will be equipped to develop the leadership and character of those they lead in the future. They will also be in leadership positions that will enable them connect the dots between their experiences at the Academy and their experiences at other Air Force training and education programs. Partnerships between the Air Force Academy and ROTC, Air University, Air Education and Training Command, the Air Force Institute of Technology, etc. will continue to grow. Integration outside the walls of the Academy will become more purposeful and developmental. Initial discussions with many of these organizations as well as with our joint partners at our sister service academies are already starting to germinate. Growth will be gradual,

but if we continue the effort and maintain momentum, the potential culture change across the Air Force will be revolutionary. These are the right changes at the right time in the history of our Academy. These are the answers to “Why this? Why now?”



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