

MISSION ELEMENT LEADERS DISCUSS BLUEPRINT FOR USAFA

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Beginning new construction takes a lot of work, and if it is to be successful, it requires a lot of planning and coordination. Even when a building is undergoing renovation or improvements, the project is best undertaken with a clear plan and a lot of cooperation among all those who take part in the effort. Although the United States Air Force Academy has been in existence for over 55 years, those who oversee its operation constantly work to improve how it does business. Recently, the leaders of the three Mission Elements (ME) shared their vision of the way forward for the Academy.

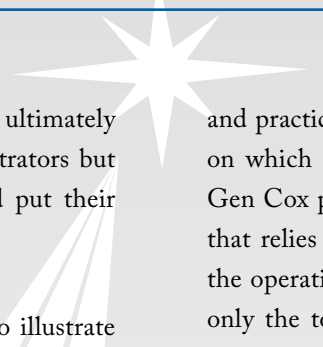
During the interviews, Lt Cols Sanders and Lindsay asked the leaders for their opinions on a variety of topics, all of which pertained to USAFA and its mission. The questions centered on character and leadership; its relevance in today's world, including at USAFA and in the operational Air Force; and how the Academy can best fulfill its mission of preparing young men and women to be leaders of character. They were interviewed separately and asked to provide illustrations based on their own experiences. Despite the fact that none of them knew what either of the other ones said,

all three leaders were strikingly united in the vision they described.

Of course, every building requires a foundation. This must be solid and support the entire rest of the structure. All three Mission Element leaders were in perfect unison on what that foundation must be: Character. They strongly echoed what many experts have written about good, effective leaders: In the words of Dr. Mueh, "You can never be a good leader and not have character." Good leaders must have both leadership ability and character. Brig Gen Born pointed out that if one has character but lacks leadership abilities, s/he may possess great and admirable characteristics but be unable to pass those traits on to others or lead them to accomplish a shared goal. Conversely, if a leader is highly effective but lacking in a solid moral and ethical grounding, the results can be disastrous. Adolf Hitler is an easy example of such a leader, but more recent examples can be found almost daily in the news. Many of the more notable recent examples come from the world of finance. Both individuals and institutions were effective in achieving their short-term goals of making money, but their lack of ethics allowed them to run afoul of the

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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inescapable laws of economics that ultimately led to disaster not just for the perpetrators but also for millions of people who had put their trust in them.

Brig Gen Cox used a billiard table to illustrate the interplay between leadership and character. In pool, the goal is to get the balls off of the table, but they must come off in designated places: the pockets. Leadership is like the force that moves the balls around on the table. Character is like the bumpers around the table. It is character that keeps the balls in proper play. Without the bumpers, most of the balls would fall from the table and out of play, reflecting the disastrous impact leadership without character. However, with the character bumpers, the balls remain in play. Thus we need a synergy of leadership and character if we are to accomplish our goals.

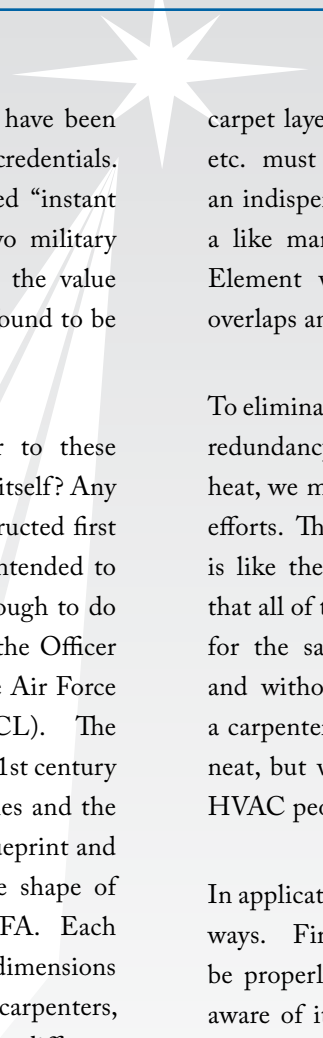
While character itself provides the broader foundation, the main ingredient of character is integrity. Every great leader whom the interviewees described was a person who displayed immaculate integrity. They had good values which they followed with unerring consistency. Dr. Mueh said that they were the kind of leader people would follow into Hell simply because of who they were.

Absolute trust is essential to all that we do, and it is more than an abstract concept; it has very real

and practical benefits. And it is the foundation on which all our activities must rest. As Brig Gen Cox pointed out, we see the need for trust that relies completely on integrity every day in the operational Air Force and it doesn't include only the top officers. When an airman tells a pilot that an airplane is ready to fly, then the pilot and crew literally bet their lives on that statement and all that it represents: that the airman and crew had done all the checks they were supposed to do and that everything met or exceeded standards.

But we don't need to step outside of USAFA to see the same principle in action. Nearly every day, several times a day, eight people sitting in an airplane put their lives into the hands of cadets who are responsible for running the freefall parachuting training. Every cadet student pilot trusts that the cadet instructor pilot who is teaching him/her is competent and has done all s/he needs to do to ensure that the flight will be both safe and successful.

Dr. Mueh provided several excellent examples of how the integrity that is so common in the military is highly valued in the civilian world as well. He cited two people who went from USAFA to prestigious positions that were having ethical problems. USAFA graduate Randy Spetman and Citadel graduate Harvey Schiller filled positions at Florida State University and the



Southeastern Conference that could have been filled with people who had stronger credentials. But when these organizations needed “instant credibility,” they looked to these two military academy graduates, thus illustrating the value of character even where it had been found to be lacking.

The foundation was perfectly clear to these leaders. But what about the structure itself? Any building must be designed and constructed first and foremost to fulfill what it was intended to do, and a foundation alone is not enough to do this. The guides for this edifice are the Officer Development System (ODS) and the Air Force Institutional Competencies List (ICL). The USAFA Outcomes are aligned with 21st century Liberal Education Learning Outcomes and the Air Force ICL. These provide the blueprint and overarching concepts that define the shape of what we are trying to build at USAFA. Each Mission Element provides different dimensions of the overall program, much like carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and masons do different types of work. However, they must all work from the same plan.

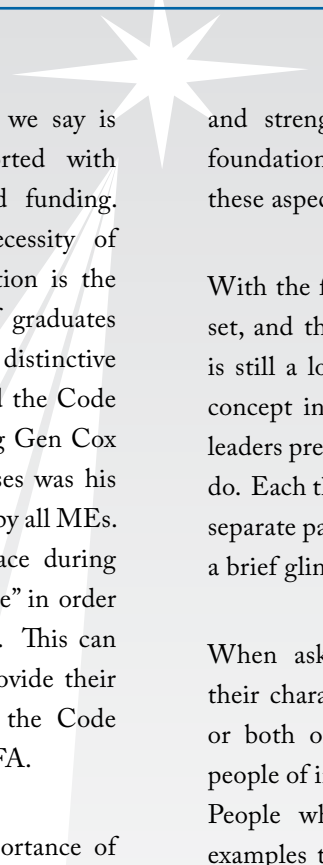
Two terms that kept coming up were integration and alignment. Integration can be illustrated by thinking of all the systems that work together in a building or even in a single room. In any office, the work of the carpenter, the mason, the

carpet layer, the HVAC people, the electricians, etc. must be present. Each contribution forms an indispensable part of the overall mission. In a like manner, as the members each Mission Element works toward the goal, their work overlaps and has effective interplay.

To eliminate two sets of wires because of needless redundancy or to avoid having an office without heat, we must coordinate and carefully plan our efforts. This brings us to alignment. Alignment is like the part of the design that makes sure that all of the different elements provide support for the same thing with seamless interaction and without needless redundancy. Otherwise a carpenter may build walls that s/he thinks are neat, but which won't support the work of the HVAC people.

In application, alignment can be seen in different ways. First, each Mission Element needs to be properly aligned to the overall plan and be aware of its interaction with other MEs. Brig Gen Born identified such organizational alignment as essential to get all forces vectoring effectively in the same direction. While this does require effort, doing so lays the groundwork for additional synergies which serve to multiply effectiveness and minimize process losses by working in opposing directions.

Another way in which alignment comes



into play is with resources. What we say is most important should be supported with resources such as time, effort, and funding. One example that reflects the necessity of alignment, integration, and cooperation is the Honor Code. Many generations of graduates look at the Code as one of the most distinctive aspects of their cadet experience, and the Code crosses all dividing lines. When Brig Gen Cox declared that investigating honor cases was his #1 priority, it needed to be supported by all MEs. Investigations may need to take place during the “Dean’s Time” and “Athletic Time” in order to be completed in a timely manner. This can take place only if all ME leaders provide their support, maintaining alignment on the Code which is integrated throughout USAFA.

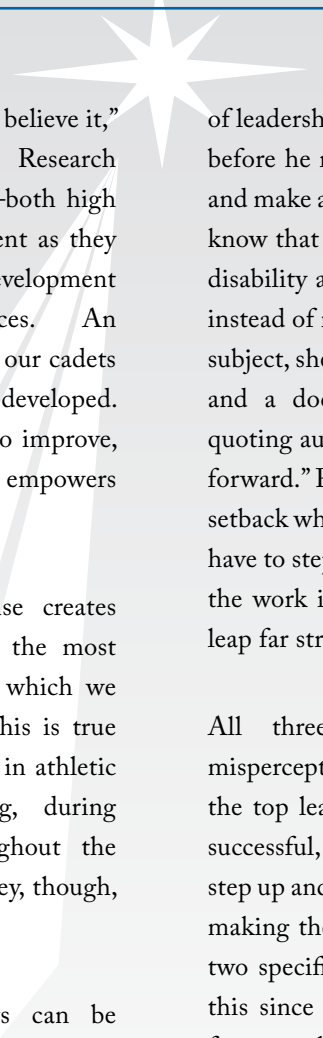
Another key illustration of the importance of integration is less distinct. When asked about what part of their experience at USAFA was most important, none of the ME leaders identified a particular program or facet. They all pointed to “the whole experience” of living here. Brig Gen Cox said, “It’s living in and living up to clear, rigorous standards every day.” For Dr. Mueh, it is learning to trust classmates and remaining true in order not to betray them. “The challenges of cadet life provide opportunities for growth and development,” said Brig Gen Born. Academics. Athletics. The Honor Code. Military training. Teamwork. All of these intertwine to support

and strengthen all of the others to build a foundation that is far stronger than the sum of these aspects separately could ever be.

With the foundation clear, the overall blueprint set, and the guiding principles identified, there is still a lot of work to do in transforming the concept into reality. From the ground up, our leaders presented many thoughts on what we can do. Each thought could well merit treatment in a separate paper, but space constrains us to provide a brief glimpse of some of the overall concepts.

When asked about what or who influenced their character, every ME leader identified one or both of their parents. They saw them as people of integrity. People who could be trusted. People who could be used as role models, examples to follow. From this we can see that even before they are appointed to come to USAFA, prospective cadets have shown a highly developed sense of character. So the first people who begin to impact our mission are those who work to recruit, select, and admit the people who have the greatest potential. Again we see an effort that crosses and transcends ME borders.

After collecting people who already have excellent character, we are off to a good start, but do we then rest on what they came in with? Some experts support the notion that character is fixed at an early age, implying that it cannot be



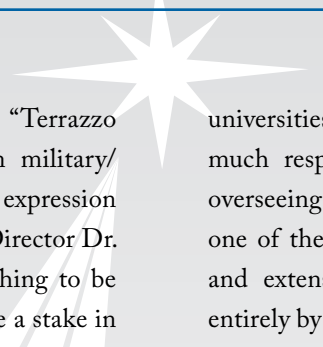
developed beyond that point. “I don’t believe it,” Brig Gen Born emphatically stated. Research has shown that people at all levels—both high and low character—show improvement as they encounter effective character development education, training, and experiences. An important part of our work is to help our cadets to believe that their character can be developed. This belief, coupled with the desire to improve, builds self-efficacy in the cadets and empowers our collective efforts.

Just as the most strenuous exercise creates the most physical development, so the most rigorous trials are the situations in which we can experience the most growth. This is true for character as well. The challenges in athletic competitions, in military training, during midterm exams and finals—throughout the academy—provide challenges. The key, though, is to use these challenges to improve.

Even failures and disappointments can be capitalized upon. All of the senior leaders took some negative experiences they had here at USAFA and turned them into growth experiences. It is interesting to note that all three top leaders mentioned negative experiences that they took with them. Two graduated with a bitterness or sense of dissatisfaction. Ironically, the Commandant was disgruntled with a matter

of leadership but it was not long after graduation before he realized that he wanted to come back and make a difference. It may surprise students to know that the Dean had to overcome a learning disability as a child and a “D” in psych class but instead of making that the final comment on the subject, she went on to earn two masters degrees and a doctorate.. As Brig Gen Born said, quoting author Willie Jolley, she learned to “Fail forward.” Failure isn’t final, but is some kind of a setback which gives us a chance to grow. We may have to step back before we can leap forward, but the work involved in stepping back makes that leap far stronger.

All three leaders spoke to dispel the misperception that the main force of change is the top leadership. In order for USAFA to be successful, the cadets must, as they always have, step up and take ownership and responsibility for making the wing run. Brig Gen Cox described two specific examples of how cadets have done this since he became the Commandant only a few months ago. It was cadets who came up with, proposed, and implemented solutions to the high number of alcohol violations and the ineffectiveness of one aspect of the disciplinary system. Brig Gen Cox didn’t want solutions that would please him—he wanted solutions that would have an impact upon the cadets, and the cadet leadership found the means to success.



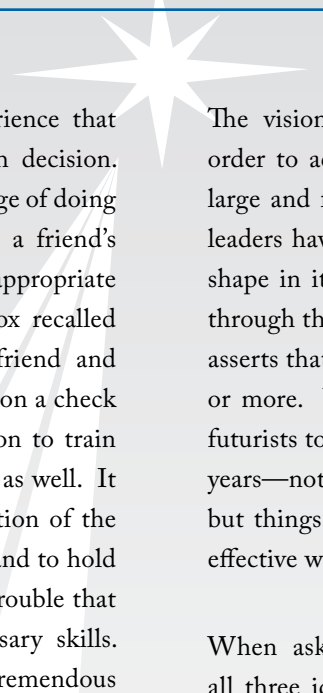
Often it is the Terrazzo side of the “Terrazzo Gap,” the perceived chasm between military/academics and athletics, that uses that expression in dismay. However, it was Athletic Director Dr. Mueh who introduced this as something to be narrowed and overcome. “We all have a stake in developing the overall athlete” [emphasis added]. Citing former Superintendent Lieutenant General John Rosa, Dr. Mueh said that cadets cannot hide from their other duties. The entire environment must remind them that they are cadets. Coaches must be good role models and keep in mind that their first priority is to turn out great Air Force officers—not just athletes. This reflects his commitment to the support of the other MEs as well as the support that he knows he can count on from them. Although she has an outstanding faculty, Brig Gen Born emphasized that they are part of a larger team working to help cadets develop and succeed. Similarly, programs must engage cadets to display initiative and take advantage of them. Early on, we offer the First Year Experience and other developmental programs to help develop skills cadets need to succeed, but they must eventually learn to stand on their own, applying or discarding these tools as they see fit and accepting the consequences. It is a partnership to develop lifelong learners.

Reflecting this mindset, it is essential to the entire Academy experience that cadets take ownership. There are few, if any, colleges and

universities in which students are given so much responsibility in running, shaping, and overseeing the institution. It is significant that one of the nation’s most stringent honor codes and extensive honor systems is implemented entirely by students who take their role seriously. Furthermore, where else can you see sophomores responsible for training freshmen? From day one through the hat toss, cadets are indispensable and central to the effectiveness of this institution.

Leadership opportunities tend to focus on things like Squadron, Wing, or Group Staff or Basic Cadet Training positions. Through these positions, cadets learn how to lead and motivate those under them. But there is another aspect of leadership and followership that began the day they walked up the Core Values Ramp (formerly called the “Bring Me Men” Ramp) and continued into their careers.

Dr. Mueh recounted an ethical challenge he experienced early in his career. He was ordered by a major to brief something that then-Captain Mueh knew to be false. The four star general had demanded targets to hit to “show” that he was doing something in the war effort. The major had identified a place that was not a threat and the bombing of which would have killed innocent people. Capt Mueh thought, “This is the end of my career,” as he prepared to tell the General the truth.



It was in large part his cadet experience that empowered him to make that tough decision. Thus cadets must embrace the challenge of doing the right thing, even if it results in a friend's getting in trouble or leads to inappropriate pushback from peers. Brig Gen Cox recalled how difficult it can be to give a friend and squadron mate an "unqualified" score on a check ride. Cadets, likewise, are called upon to train for the disciplinary side of command as well. It is in deciding not to tolerate a violation of the Honor Code, to enforce regulations, and to hold accountable friends who may create trouble that they learn and develop these necessary skills. But, as with failure, adversity offers tremendous opportunity.

One question that was asked dealt with how USAFA can prepare cadets to meet the challenges that they will soon face when they leave the shelter of the dorms and go to live in tents. Instead of clear, well-structured programs they will face the hardships, dangers, and unpredictability of an asymmetrical environment. Dr. Mueh provided great insight by pointing out that the new combat environment really hasn't changed the requirements placed on warriors—it has just provided more difficult challenges. Thus what was once required is even more important than it was before. In other words, to prepare for the challenges of tomorrow, become a master of the timeless skills you are learning today.

The vision is an enormous challenge, but in order to achieve excellence, the vision must be large and far-reaching. The work that USAFA leaders have been developing for years is taking shape in its Strategic Plan which will guide us through the next few years. But Brig Gen Born asserts that must look further out: 10 or 20 years or more. We need to start now, working with futurists to anticipate what we will need in a few years—not just infrastructure and technology, but things that will better equip us to be more effective with the next generation.

When asked what challenges they perceived, all three identified communication between all MEs to accomplish the goals of integration and alignment. They are, if you will, three distinct cultures. They each have something valuable to offer and they have their own languages and jargon. So it is essential that they all strive to communicate and share the dream, much as the current ME leaders are doing. There were also some specific challenges they identified.

For example, Brig Gen Born's faculty and staff turn over at an aggressive pace. Between one quarter and one third of the faculty turns over every year. Thus faculty development takes on tremendous importance. It is the long-term vision and a robust, aggressive program to get new and returning instructors oriented and mission effective as quickly as possible that equip

the Dean of Faculty to continue to build on an already excellent program.

In summary, many things have remained the same. Character remains central. “If you think we overteach character, . . . there’s a reason for that. The world is looking for people with character.” Beyond the foundation we are guided by familiar guidelines: the ODS, Air Force ICL, and the USAFA Outcomes. As overarching principles, we must always pay attention to integration and alignment of all programs to achieve the same goal. And through all of the clamor of construction, it is essential to communicate that all our efforts are perfectly coordinated.

In responding to the interview questions, Brig Gen Cox, Brig Gen Born, and Dr. Mueh each reflected keen awareness of the task and of the roles of one another. Their plan is well-laid out and they are committed to seeing its successful completion, and they are eager to empower the cadets, the ones who truly put in the labor, to fulfill these plans and dreams as they work together to build a strong future for USAFA.

This blueprint is not new in concept, but provides a clearer, more comprehensive and cohesive vision for the faculty and staff at USAFA as they execute their mission. It also shows the way forward for the key builders of USAFA: the cadets, as they take the torch that has been passed to them so that they may make USAFA the Air Force’s premier institution for developing leaders of character.