Collaborating on Character…
The SACCA Story

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Background

The essence of synergy is when the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Working together, all benefit more than their individual contributions. This is true for potlucks (a remarkably ironic term) as well as for organizational efforts. On the other hand, working in isolation, or compartmentalized efforts (i.e., "stove pipes," "rice bowls," etc), is the antithesis of synergy. If there was ever an area that desperately needs synergistic effort, it would be character and leadership development and assessment at our Federal Service Academies.

In 2004, while working for Analytic Services Incorporated (ANSER), co-author Steve Shambach was involved in a study of the Air Force Academy's character and leadership development from accession to commissioning. One study focus area was to recommend the means to assess the commissioning suitability of cadets with regards to character. While there are acceptable measures of suitability for commissioning regarding academic, physical and military fitness, there did not appear to be the same level of confidence that the Academy was commissioning leaders of character. How could we know that?

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Starting first with the Air Force Academy, our team learned how USAFA was attempting to assess character. While some modest efforts had been made, it was acknowledged that little was known about the validity or reliability of the assessment efforts being used. Further, character assessment was not a priority at the Academy, and there were insufficient resources (people, time and money) allocated for this purpose. Prospects for advancement of character assessment efforts were dim. Next, a site visit to the Naval Academy highlighted the same challenges. Further, the Naval Academy was not aware of what the Air Force Academy was doing regarding character assessment. Subsequent visits to the Coast Guard Academy, and Merchant Academy, and Military Academy (West Point), provided the same result.

It became obvious that, while each Academy had the desire to improve character assessment, each on their own lacked the people, time and money to make significant strides in character assessment. Therefore, it would no doubt be advantageous to begin collaborating in order to improve everyone's ability to do assessments (NOTE: This insight was a major recommendation in the ANSER study published in 2005[1]).

In December, 2007, the US Air Force Academy created and filled a Senior Character Development Program Analyst position, responsible for, among other things, determining the extent to which character was being developed in cadets. The first major initiative of this Analyst was to establish a collaborative effort among all the Service Academies. Coincidentally, at precisely this time, the Director of the USAFA Center for Character Development, had already identified this need and

had invited the five Federal Service Academies for a meeting at USAFA to initiate a collaborative effort, and that all had accepted.

SACCA Begins

Service Academy Commandants approved a character assessment consortium at the Conference of Service Academy Superintendents (COSAS) meeting in 2008. There were two primary drivers behind the support for the character assessment consortium.   First, there was a recognized need for an integrated character development and assessment approach across all the service academies. Since the service academies possess a common mission to produce leaders for the nation (i.e., those with the character and calling to lead and serve), it was deemed important to demonstrate that the academies do, in fact, promote this kind of development capability during the 47-month experience when cadets and midshipmen are in residence. Thus, the academies should be able to show changes in moral growth of their graduates. Moreover, this development must be specifically tied to an intentional curriculum and set of learning/developmental experiences. If leader and character development is merely due to maturation effects, the service academies are not the causal factor for increases in desired characteristics. An understanding of outcomes and the interventions that give rise to these outcomes is critical to guide program improvements and provide a more sophisticated assessment of progress.

The second push for the consortium was the fact that collaboration supports synergies and economies of effort. There is no doubt that there are many common leader of character factors and processes across the service academies, even

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[1] *Developing Leaders of Character at the U.S. Air Force Academy*, ANSER Rinal Report, 25 April 2005.

though graduates support different branches of the military or serve the nation in different ways. One distinct commonality is that no service academy is satisfied with current efforts in developing and assessing leader of character development. Given this common problem, it is not only smart, but prudent to develop and share effective lessons and best-practices. This prevents duplication of effort, and also focuses and channels resources toward opportunities and significant areas of need. The current effort responds to a longstanding need at the academies and reflects the positive elements of a truly joint effort.

In June, 2008, the academies met at USAFA and the Service Academy Consortium on Character Assessment (SACCA), as it would later be named, was born. The purposes of this first meeting were to become familiar with each other's developmental programs, assessment strategies, and initiatives. From this, SACCA would frame shared issues and objectives, and mobilize as a collective unit around the commonality of interest, the commonality of need, and a mutual benefit that was possible by collaboration among the academies.

An important factor in the consideration of leader and character development is the rapidly changing environment within which officers need to operate, with implications for supporting our cadets and midshipmen to be able to meet these evolving and future requirements. With some of the opportunities and challenges in mind, the group resolved to establish a consortium that would meet regularly and would draft a charter committing each Academy to contribute, support and share information and initiatives with each other to more efficiently and effectively further the development and assessment of character at each institution. Despite the apparent interest and

enthusiasm, the SACCA group was unable to secure written agreement to a charter by all Academy Commandants. Undeterred, the SACCA group has crafted a charter (See Appendix), and persisted in its efforts over the past 2 ½ years, meeting semiannually face-to-face and, in the interim, with quarterly Video Teleconferences.

Although there are some specific differences in values and service cultures, the SACCA group has elevated its focus to two broad areas: developmental initiatives/opportunities and assessment strategies. The developmental initiatives group focuses on interventions and experiences that enhance, promote, and reinforce the development of leadership and character. The assessment group's efforts are oriented toward an evaluation of impact, fundamentally examining whether specific or general interventions provided a positive increment in these critical qualities. Although there is some specialization in terms of SACCA members aligning with either the assessment or developmental group, there is ongoing convergence in dialog and efforts to show that the developmental opportunities do contribute to change and that the assessments could detect development.

SACCA Progress

Among the many things that are unclear about leader and character development and assessment, one thing is clear--it is extraordinarily complicated with wide-ranging conceptualizations and definitions and no uniform set of procedures that universally guarantee significant development or crystal clear metrics. Consequently, SACCA has been working to narrow the frameworks and ways of thinking about these topics in order to establish an initial platform. There is some risk in such a

strategy, given that some useful ideas may not be considered and explored. Despite this, it seemed most prudent to not be tied to a linear approach and to be optimistic that the more the group moved forward, the more would be learned. In this spirit, the committee opted to define character in a very general manner as the *embodiment of the service's Core Values*. Rather than getting embroiled in specific language, this definition would span all service academies, and, for the time being, would suffice. Thus, values around duty, country, selflessness, integrity, respect, honor, loyalty, courage and commitment, reflect the character foundations for each of the academies.

The conceptual framework that integrates these character dimensions and leadership is a dynamic model that expands a more typical input-process-output model. Not surprisingly, this is a complex model in need of further refinement. The input element relates to antecedent variables which include the wide range of character and leaders qualities, experiences, readiness, and potential of incoming cadets and midshipmen.

Process components range from fairly broad to fairly narrow. The broader process dimensions impacting character and leader development include the culture and climate of the service academy (the moderators), whereas the more narrow process elements that impact the student body include the actual experiences a cadet is exposed to (which mediate the outcomes). Within the process level, there is significant consideration given to the interaction of two moral processes, moral awareness and moral reasoning, that also interact to impact moral action. Although, moral action is certainly one intended outcome that would define a leader of character, SACCA has also selected six virtues to operationalize the global

heading of "outcomes." The six virtues are respect, loyalty, selfless service, integrity, decision-making, and courage.

In support of this preliminary conceptualization and framework, the service academies are pooling their resources and background experiences. This clearly supports this effort as a joint process, and moreover, it facilitates the sharing and application of "best practices." This is crucial for availability of information and promotes outcomes related to cross-sharing for common academic courses, experiential training, and current efforts in program evaluation. This orientation has led to some partnerships around the use of The Armed Forces Officer (2007) at all the academies, collaboration with the Army Center for Professional Ethics (an agency at the leading edge for the Army's immediate requirement in terms of leadership and character), use of interactive video technology (USMA's "Leader Challenge" and USNA's "Last Call"), and the use of online shared workspace for SACCA through Defense Knowledge Online.

The cross-sharing of information and resources has helped SACCA narrow the range of assessment options. After exploring an assortment of potential and useful metrics, the committee has opted to begin with the Values in Action (VIA) as its cornerstone. This is not an absolute, but given the sparse literature on character assessments and linkages to outcomes, particularly leadership outcomes, the VIA provides a reasonable starting point—even if it ultimately becomes the "straw man" in the assessment strategy. Further, this does not imply that previously used and other assessments will not continue to have a role in character assessment. There are assessments, such as the Defining Issues Test and Ethical Decision Making Instrument, that do provide useful pieces

of information. The VIA is appealing, certainly in part because it assesses a range of values that tie the academies together. Even though there are variations in the academies' core values, the VIA touches on all of these. Additionally, the VIA has been used at three of the academies which provides a solid benchmark regarding the areas of importance to our cadets and midshipmen.

Challenges

Despite the sharing of information and agreement on some core matters, there are some significant challenges that SACCA has encountered. To be sure, one of the most challenging issues has been to grapple with leader and character development and assessment. It is difficult to achieve consensus on the definition of terms (e.g., note the rather vague definition of character mentioned earlier) and equally challenging to operationalize the concepts. However, this is a common difficulty that any organization addressing these issues would face. There are other challenges that may also be encountered in other organizations, as some of the SACCA difficulties are those described by many Human Resource agencies.

One of the challenges is institutional priority. The size of the character and leadership centers vary a great deal across the service academies, ranging from a single person to a larger, but until recently, more segregated staff (one branch focusing on leadership and an independent branch addressing character). Many SACCA members support this effort as an additional duty; there is another full-time job that makes it impossible to be singularly committed. As one might expect, this contributes to membership instability, as the players change at virtually every VTC and in-person meeting. An understandable component of this is the

reassignment cycle, although staff shortages make succession planning and overlapping experience problematic.

A second challenge in this regard is budget support. There is no overarching budget to support SACCA across the academies and no budget at each academy for expenses. Each agency provides its own travel money. As noted, this has some impact on membership stability. In conjunction with constraints on time, there are no training opportunities for SACCA members to attend professional conferences or specific training sessions and seminars.

Third, SACCA is operating semi-autonomously. As a body it has no formal authority and is only in a recommending position. However, it is not strongly recognized at any of the academies and is still operating without a COSAS Memorandum of Understanding legitimizing its efforts. This becomes problematic when attempting sampling surveys, pilot studies or even implementing innovative approaches to character development. Institutional change is daunting without senior leadership support. These factors contribute to SACCA as an ad hoc body of well-intentioned members but no formalized role.

The Way Ahead

Despite the myriad of challenges, SACCA supports an important mission for the service academies and each of the services. Given today's world situation with all kinds of turmoil and instability, the ongoing global war on terrorism, and the demanding role for military members, minor adjustments and changes at the margins in developing leaders of character are insufficient in keeping pace with the needs of future leaders. The capability to "stay ahead of the future" requires

significant research, development, and institutional support. SACCA intends to press the boundaries in terms of initiatives to develop and assess leadership and character and to think creatively in a resource strapped environment. This includes looking for opportunities for collaboration, identifying best practices in all organizations, evaluating non-traditional assessment strategies, and finding synergies wherever they might exist.

Conclusion

SACCA provides an important self-organizing, synergistic capability for collaboration among the five federal service academies to improve character and leadership development and assessment. Since its inception in 2008, this group has accelerated each member's learning and understanding of character and leadership providing a common frame of reference and approach to more effectively and efficiently advance the practice of leadership development that would not be possible by themselves individually. *Our armed forces need the academies to provide junior officer leaders of character capable of effectively leading our military both now and in the future. This urgent need is beyond the capability of any single Academy and can only be met by substantial collaboration and cooperation in research, assessment and programs among the Academies.* Significant challenges face the group, including scarce resources (people, money, time) and, in some cases, the necessary supportive culture and environment to encourage cross-service academy efforts. The "Not Invented Here" crowd and service parochialism are alive and well at each institution. SACCA initiatives are not a substitute for service peculiar scholarship, research and assessment suitable for each service's warfighting needs and culture. Nonetheless, we believe that anticipated break-through findings and data based scholarship will prove the value of our SACCA efforts in the large realm of common areas of interest.

Appendix

CHARTER OF THE

SERVICE ACADEMY CONSORTIUM for CHARACTER ASSESSMENT (SACCA)

1 Nov 2008

1. PURPOSE:

To establish a Service Academy Consortium for Character Assessment (SACCA), a joint working group formed by representatives of the United States Federal Service Academies (SAs) (US Military Academy, US Naval Academy, US Air Force Academy, US Coast Guard Academy, and US Merchant Marine Academy). This Consortium is established to collaborate on common goals for character development and assessment. It is intended to build synergy across the SAs to maximize effectiveness in commissioning officers of character, as well as promote best practices in developing and assessing character across the four-year SA experience.

2. BACKGROUND

    a. During the April 2008 Conference of Service Academy Superintendents (COSAS), the Commandants agreed to initiate a joint effort focused on improving SA ability to assess the development of character in Cadets and Midshipmen.

    b. In June 2008, an initial planning meeting convened at USAFA. Each SA was represented. (see Memorandum for SACCA Attendees, 9 Jul 08).

    c. Recognizing the mission of the SACCA will extend beyond the tenures of the original representatives, the conferees identified the need for a Charter outlining the purpose and approach agreed upon for the Consortium.

3. CONSORTIUM CHARTER

    a. To identify and evaluate the relative effectiveness of present character development efforts and present methodologies for evaluating character development.

    b. To share lessons-learned about new approaches to character development.

    c. To cooperate in exploring/developing new approaches for assessing character development across the four-year SA experience.

4. OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS

    a. Character assessment is defined as measuring the degree to which Cadets and Midshipmen embody their service's Core Values.

    b. The evaluation time-frame is from entry to commissioning.

    c. The consortium will meet at least once per year (normally during the springtime) and will coordinate electronically at least semi-annually, using Video Teleconference or other technology.

    d. The Consortium will compile a list of active SA character assessment initiatives including those already being developed/implemented across more than one SA; this list will be updated annually (as required) prior to the annual meeting.

    e. The Consortium will be supported by each SA according to their individual capacities. Implementation will include data collection, analyses, and reporting of applicable results to other members of the Consortium.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. The SAs will designate members of the Consortium whose day-to-day responsibilities include development and assessment of character in Cadets and Midshipmen.
b. Specifically, each SA will identify a Senior Representative who will lead the Consortium effort for their Academy.
c. In addition, other individuals from each SA will be assigned to support the Consortium mission as needed.
d. The Chairman of the Consortium will be designated by agreement among the Senior Representatives and will serve for a period of one year (renewable), and will be affirmed during the annual meeting. Each one-year term will begin at the conclusion of the annual meeting (normally, in the springtime).

6. REPORTING

a. Joint reports of progress and findings/recommendations will be prepared (as appropriate) for senior SA decision-makers.
b. No descriptions of Consortium activity or analyses will be publically presented unless agreed upon by all participating SAs.

7. FUNDING

Resource requirements are the responsibility of each SA. Each SA's level of participation for the following year will be discussed at the annual springtime meeting.

8. CONTINUATION of the CONSORTIUM

This agreement will be reviewed, and either reaffirmed or updated, at the annual meeting.

(Signatures Removed)

References

ANSER (2005). *Developing Leaders of Character at the U.S. Air Force Academy: From "First Contact" to Commissioning*, Final report prepared for Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs.