

## OUTCOME ARTICLE

# THE HUMAN CONDITION, CULTURES, AND SOCIETIES OUTCOME: WHO WE ARE DETERMINES WHAT WE DO

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## Introduction

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is one of the premier commissioning sources for Air Force Officers. To prepare cadets to take on their commission as officers, USAFA seeks “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” (USAFA Mission Statement). This mission is rooted in a vision that finds its succinct articulation in the Air Force’s core values of “integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do,” namely to serve as “the Air Force’s premier institution for developing Leaders of Character” (USAFA Vision Statement). Premier in terms of its education and as an accession source for officers in the Air Force, USAFA is also premier with respect to its military and civilian leaders, faculty, trainers, and coaches, as well as being home to cutting-edge labs and centers in a variety of fields and disciplines. Of the latter, the institution’s premier center focused directly on USAFA’s vision, namely “developing Leaders of Character,” is the Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD).

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Working creatively and diligently with all USAFA mission elements—from the Dean of Faculty (DF) to the Cadet Wing (CW) to the Department of Athletics (AD)—the CCLD is continually seeking to educate and habituate one and all to think deeply about what it means to be an individual of character and, moreover, live conscientiously as a good person of good character. Over the past few years, one innovative and fruitful endeavor to foster common dialogue with the foregoing in mind, has been tying the CCLD’s annual National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) to one of the nine institutional outcomes, which collectively undergird and direct all USAFA programs related

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to cadet education and training.<sup>1</sup> NCLS is USAFA’s most important and influential institutional event for the exploration of a wide variety of themes related to character. And this year’s theme of “Valuing Human Conditions, Cultures, and Societies,” tied directly to the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome, is particularly important. Through a wide and diverse range of first-rate speakers and presentations, NCLS 2020 intends to explore the critical question of “who we are” and why this question is not only interesting, but key to valuing not only ourselves but others, and engaging with one and all compassionately and constructively.

The Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome and this year’s NCLS theme are grounded in a truism of life that what one does proceeds

from who one is. This applies to individuals no less than nations and states—from interpersonal relationships to foreign policy. And a corollary to the foregoing—also a truism—is that the more coherent one’s identity is, the more coherent will be one’s interactions with others. The opposite is equally true: incoherence with respect to identity leads more often than not to incoherence in action, often with debilitating, if not destructive, consequences.

The implication of all this is that the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome is arguably foundational to all the other outcomes which deal overtly with key human activities, such as politics, ethics, officership-statesmanship, and STEM exploration and implementation—all of which draw on the functionally empowering Outcomes dealing with Critical Thinking and Clear Communication.<sup>2</sup> In simple terms: without one understanding who one is, one cannot act meaningfully—identity precedes activity. As Samuel Huntington states in a seminal article on the meaning of identity and interest:

“Efforts to define national interest presuppose agreement on the nature of the country whose interests are to be defined. National interest derives from national identity. We have to know who we are before we can know what our interests are.” (Huntington, 1997, p. 28)

Arguably, this applies especially to a government rooted in the will of “we the people.”

With the foregoing in mind, the following essay, then, is intended to serve three purposes. First, it intends to convey to the reader a reasonably robust

<sup>1</sup> A full list of USAFA’s outcomes can be found at: <https://www.usafa.edu/academics/outcomes/>.

<sup>2</sup> Again, reference the foregoing link for a full list of USAFA’s outcomes along with the White Papers explaining what each of them entails.

sense of what is entailed in the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome, which expands upon what is stated succinctly in the Outcome's White Paper (Appendix A).<sup>3</sup> Second, it correlates the proficiencies of this Outcome to the courses and programs involved in ensuring the students at the United States Air Force Academy—the cadets—receive the requisite education, training, and habituation to grow personally and professionally, and, as professionals, fulfill the Air Force's mission “to fly, fight and win in air, space and cyberspace.” Third and finally, the essay concludes with some thoughts of what we can and should do to make this year's NCLS a resounding success, personally and professionally.

### What is the Human Condition?

As one of USAFA's nine institutional outcomes, the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome is structured around three fundamental pillars:

- Know Oneself (yourself)
- Know Others *and*
- Constructive Engagement

In simple terms, whether in one's professional or personal life, if one wants meaningful (constructive) relationships (engagements) one has to have a robust sense of oneself as well as the person or people with whom one is engaging, or seeking to engage. The more

<sup>3</sup> A longer, more foundational examination of the meaning of this Outcome will be forthcoming in this journal as an occasional paper to be published in late February/early March. The occasional paper will spend considerable time addressing the theoretical and philosophical foundations of what it means to be a human being, as well as human beings situated in particular social and cultural milieus. In short, it is not amiss to note that while this particular essay will provide the reader a robust sense of the operational and tactical implications of this Outcome, the occasional paper will focus on strategic matters, both with respect to the touchstones undergirding this Outcome and with respect to the vision of what this Outcome hopes to achieve in the life of officer candidates as they look to serve as officer-statesmen in our globally-minded and engaged Air Force.

thoughtful we are about who we are in light of who others are, the more likely we are to acquire a coherent self-awareness, an awareness of what makes someone else tick, and consequently, the ability to effectively interact to build relationships and community.

How does this Outcome go about nurturing such knowledge and awareness with respect to oneself and others? To answer that question, it will prove helpful to consider the strategic, operational, and tactical vantage points as they relate to this Outcome and, by extension, this year's NCLS theme.

The strategic level might best be understood by what Aristotle refers to as doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for—and here is the critical element—the right reason (Aristotle, 1999). Now, no one can get anyone to embrace the right reason, unless the individual has both desire and ability to do so. As the proverb reminds us, you can lead a horse—or a student or friend or whoever—to water, but you cannot get them to necessarily drink. Yet leading a soul to water is itself a critical step, if there is ever going to be any hope of having one drink deeply from the well of wisdom.

This brings us to the operational level, and it is here that the bulk of the work related to the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome team is accomplished. From DF to AD to CW, this Outcome seeks to assist one and all to think meaningfully about who they are, about who others are, and then to engage with them constructively. When we talk about constructive engagement, this can be something as seemingly simple as two cadets from different parts of the country meeting informally in Mitchell Hall for dinner and conversation, to airmen serving overseas and engaging in joint military operations with allies.

Whether personally or professionally, the more attuned cadets are to what it means to be a human being, a citizen in a republic, and an officer-statesman dedicated to protecting and defending the Constitution of the United States, the more purposefully they can fulfill their professional responsibilities and personal goals. Indeed, speaking of these latter two elements, we find ourselves at the tactical level.

At the tactical level, the proverbial rubber meets the road. Here we rightly talk about respecting human dignity, promoting an inclusive and diverse environment, valuing ourselves and others, and fulfilling the mission by nurturing airmen with the requisite character to pursue integrity, excellence, and service. But these words remain but words, if we do not think deeply and coherently about what they mean, what they require of us, and what this all has to do with nurturing respect in our personal and professional relationships.

We, therefore, find ourselves back at the operational level, even as we strive to nurture strategic thinkers, who not only are habituated as officers of character but learn to do the right thing at the right time in the right way precisely because they are rooted in and attuned to the right reason. From the classroom to the field (from the fields of friendly strife to a semester exchange abroad) to the operational Air Force, the ability of cadets—of all of us—to effectively function on the interpersonal or inter-professional level is rooted in our ability to have a robust knowledge of ourselves and of others, a knowledge that is often gained precisely through our interactions with others in a continuous feedback loop. A key component of this enterprise is undeniably the classroom and the education that a cadet receives related to what it means to be a human being rooted in a particular cultural and social milieu.

### The Education Entailed in this Outcome

Having examined the structural elements of this outcome, we can now turn to examining how this outcome is implemented in the course of studies of a cadet at USAFA. Each of the aforementioned pillars have particular proficiencies associated with them (Appendix A).

With respect to “knowing oneself,” the first proficiency (Proficiency 1) demands that a student carefully “describe key elements of their own identity” with relationship to what it means to be a human being. The next step involves situating the universality of being human in the particularity of an individual’s time and place, which means for students at USAFA—no longer merely students but cadets, which is to say officer-candidates—to understand that they are “citizens in a republic,” a particular form of government that should not be confused or conflated with democracy, pure and simple. Now, although cadets share this facet of self-knowledge with every other American citizen, the reality that they are budding officer-statesmen in the United States Air Force makes this something more than a mere civic responsibility. This telescoping trinity of identities are the absolute framework in which USAFA graduates will exist as commissioned officers. It is therefore critical that they understand what these identities entail and how they came to be. This brings us to Proficiency 2.

Understanding self is never an abstraction but always something that is situated in a particular milieu. It is therefore important for cadets to be able to “explain the historical, cultural, societal, and political developments that have shaped” their identity as human beings, citizens, and officer-statesmen. The first two proficiencies are intertwined such that a knowledge of individual identity (Proficiency 1) requires an

understanding of a person’s social environment—both historic and contemporary (Proficiency 2)—that shaped that identity and continues to shape it.

It is at this stage that the student is finally ready to begin examining and distinguishing between “objective (universally true) and subjective (biased) elements of their own identity” (Proficiency 3). Indeed, the third proficiency is best understood not as a third step following the first two steps, but rather as the third element of one large intertwined step that involves understanding oneself and one’s times and making good and necessary distinctions between what is objectively (universally) true and what is subjective and so biased, which does not necessarily mean unwarranted, though it does mean it is not universally true or applicable.

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Equipped to make good and necessary distinctions between what “is,” what “ought to be,” and what is neither here nor there with respect to human flourishing no less than with respect to the domestic and foreign policy milieus, cadets are ready to “defend or critique both objective and subjective elements of their own identity” (Proficiency 4).

In sum, the mental, emotional, and spiritual labor of providing a reasonable and robust defense and critique (Proficiency 4) of the objective and subjective elements in one’s identity (Proficiency 3) is accomplished in light of the individual understanding the various factors that have shaped their identity (Proficiency 2), which involves for cadets at USAFA an understanding of what it means to be a human being, a citizen in a republic,

and an officer-statesmen in the Air Force (Proficiency 1). Indeed, one can readily argue that this defense and critique of Proficiency 4, is the natural extension of Proficiency 3. All thought remains sterile if it does not shape how one lives.

What has been discussed in terms of self-knowledge can and must now be applied in the same manner to others in the same order as it unfolds for one’s self. Proficiencies 5 through 8 of “know others” are parallel to Proficiencies 1 through 4 of “know oneself.” The

individual’s attunement to self informs one’s ability to “describe key elements” in another’s identity (Proficiency 5), explain the milieu that “shaped another’s identity” (Proficiency 6), make good and necessary distinctions “between objective (universally true) and subjective (biased) elements of another’s identity” (Proficiency 7), and “defend or critique both objective and subjective elements of another’s identity” (Proficiency 8).

Indeed, the first two pillars of this outcome (namely self-knowledge and other knowledge) are best understood not in terms of chronological linkage—first self-knowledge and then other knowledge—but as intertwined and requiring interplay at each stage. The principle of contrariety, and by extension the principle

of congruity, which undergirds the ability to make reasonable and meaningful comparisons and contrasts with and between things, is a fundamental tenant of human existence. The ability to utilize these principles effectively determines one's ability to grow in terms of self-knowledge, which is ever in relation to other knowledge.

It is the interaction—engagement—with others that brings us to the last pillar: “Constructive Engagement.” This pillar is rooted in two interrelated proficiencies that are akin in spirit to the proficiencies that have come before with respect to knowledge and action—correct action presupposes correct knowledge.

Constructive engagement requires an individual to first “explain the uniqueness and interconnections of various peoples, cultures, and societies in their appropriate spatial and temporal contexts” (Proficiency 9), and then to “respond prudently to various cultural and social scenarios, settings, and situations, whether in the classroom or in the field” (Proficiency 10). The ability to respond effectively to the geo-political complexities on an international scale and the socio-cultural complexities of human interactions on an interpersonal scale, both presuppose the ability to explain what unites and divides human beings such that mankind can constructively engage at the right time in the right way for the right reasons.

Another way of understanding this is in terms of what is referred to as intercultural knowledge and cross-cultural competence. The former overlays with the first two pillars of this outcome (self and other knowledge) and the latter with constructive engagement. Understanding oneself and another is central to intercultural knowledge, and the ability to effectively interact across cultures is the heart of cross-cultural competence. With respect to the education and

training of USAFA cadets, this entails preparing cadets in the classroom to effectively interact with others across the spectrum of their activities, both personal and professional. For instance, a cadet learning about self and others as a German language minor would have the opportunity to engage with the people and culture he or she has been studying while participating in a target country and language immersion program. Returning to the classroom, this individual has now not only studied about self and others, but has gained life experiences related to both and would, ideally, bring this learning and these experiences back to the classroom to enrich the learning environment for all. In turn, this individual might go on a longer semester exchange, or participate as a commissioned officer in the Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP—the Air Force's premier language learning program for officers). From the classroom to the field to the operational Air Force, such a student-officer is truly a life-long learner. Examining propositions about what it means to be a human being situated in a particular culture and society, such an individual “tests” various hypotheses in the field, and through a continuous loop of learning and living embodies precisely the type of life-long learner the institution desires to nurture.

### The Courses Linked to this Outcome

As with all education (akin to the first three principles of real estate being location, location, and location), the educational enterprise is about teachers, teachers, and teachers. A great teacher can enliven a banal subject, and a bad teacher can take the most interesting and important of topics and make it appear boring. For this outcome—as for all educational outcomes at any institution—to succeed, the right teachers educating in the right way at the right time for the right reasons are critical. It is with this in mind that all outcome teams have been formed to nurture this interplay across disciplines and across mission elements (not only the



classroom but also the military training environment and the athletic field). To illuminate how this works itself out, at least as it should work itself out, it will prove profitable to examine the various courses that currently directly contribute to this outcome—both why and how they contribute.

Currently, the following academic courses are linked to this outcome (listed in order of level):

- Foreign Language 131-132: Basic Sequence. These introductory foreign language courses are taught in one of the eight languages offered at USAFA. These languages are German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese. These courses align with Proficiencies 5 through 10, which fall under “know others” and “constructive engagement.”
- History 300: World History. The course addresses all 10 Proficiencies under the three pillars.
- Behavioral Sciences 360: Sociology. This course addresses Proficiency 3 under “know oneself,” Proficiency 6 under “know others,” and Proficiencies 9 and 10 under “constructive engagement.”
- English 411: Language, Literature, and Leadership. The course focuses on Proficiency 2 under “know oneself” and Proficiencies 5 and 6 under “know others.”
- Geography 412: World Cultural Geography. The course focuses on Proficiencies 1 and 3 under “know oneself,” Proficiency 6 under “know others,” and Proficiencies 9 and 10 under “constructive engagement.”

Although not directly a course or series of courses, the Department of International Programs (DFIP

is housed in the Department of Foreign Languages (DFF)) is tied to this outcome given the emphasis this outcome places on intercultural knowledge and cross-cultural competence. In conjunction with language courses, DFIP’s standard pre-departure cultural training modules, the assessment framework of the highly regarded Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), and pre- and post-assessments conducted by DFIP—all Proficiencies under “know others” and “constructive engagement” are directly addressed.

The participation of these courses versus other courses is partly prudential and partly necessary given that some courses that could readily fit into this outcome are already committed to developing and assessing other outcomes. With respect to prudential considerations, an individual’s identity is undeniably shaped by history, geography, and language. These are key elements, and though there are others that could readily be included, these three subject areas (and the particular courses listed) directly address themselves to the individual engaged in an interconnected world—world languages, history, and geography. English is a logical extension given that the primary language of identity of USAF officer-statesmen is English, in addition to being the lingua franca of this particular epoch of human history. In addition, the particular nature of this course connects the English language to works of literature that deal with leadership and the correlated question of identity in terms of citizenship and officer-statesmanship. Finally, the methodology of sociology situates and connects identities across cultures and societies by offering the student the requisite analytical tools to examine objective and subjective similarities and differences.

The sequencing and interplay of these courses causes all 10 Proficiencies under the three pillars to be covered, often from several angles (e.g., both

History and Geography address Proficiency 1, while all five disciplines—six if one includes DFIP—address Proficiency 6, each discipline bringing its expertise and unique vantage point to bear on the topic). Although there is arguably always some room for improvement, the current sequencing and interplay work quite well and, if properly implemented, provide cadets with a robust understanding of self and others as well as allowing them to constructively engage in a variety of ways.

### NCLS 2020 and the Way Forward

Given that the 2020 NCLS theme, “Valuing Human Conditions, Cultures, and Societies,” is directly correlated to the work of the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome, it should prove a wonderful opportunity for students, professors, trainers, visitors, and leaders of all stripes to constructively engage on a variety of topics related to what it means to be a human being, not least human beings who are also citizens in a republic and, moreover, officer-statesmen.

As with all things, adequate preparation is key, and this holds equally true for NCLS 2020. It is important for all participants to spend some time before, during, and, maybe most importantly, afterward, contemplating what all this means. Reading about the speakers is a start, but far more important is reading about what they have to say about valuing the human condition. Having a robust sense about a particular speaker’s topic and presentation will allow one to get the most out of the presentation, not least Q&A. More importantly, the reading, contemplation, and conversation should not end with the conclusion of the presentation or the conclusion of NCLS. Indeed, NCLS should be the start, if not the continuation of all this, as we all seek to value the human condition, human societies, and human cultures in our personal

and professional lives. The formulation of linkage is simple, if a bit more difficult in practice: read carefully, think deeply, converse wisely, and live prudently!<sup>4</sup>

Whether in the classroom, on the parade or training grounds, or on the athletic fields of friendly strife—let alone the fields of not so friendly strife that along with the geo-political realities of our world comprise the civil-military spectrum—self-knowledge in relation to other knowledge, resulting in constructive engagement, is the only truly viable means of striving to create a better tomorrow. It begins with you—that is the existential lesson of all life. Although one can readily excuse oneself by asking what others are or are not doing, the question remains what will you do or what will I do—that is what will we do in light of the foregoing? NCLS 2020 can be a start, if one has not already begun the journey; NCLS 2020 can be a continuation, if one has. It should inform all that one thinks, says, and does in the spirit of life-long learning giving rise to a long life filled with learning about what it means to be a human being, a citizen in a republic, and an officer-statesmen dedicated to protecting and defending the Constitution of the United States. On a practical level, start a reading group, audit a class, converse with others who are eager to live the good life, and, in and through all, live with the purposefulness that is mindful of the words of Marcus Aurelius:

“It is in your power to secure at once all the objects which you dream of reaching by a roundabout path, if you will be fair to yourself: that is, if you will leave all the past behind, commit the future to Providence, and direct the present, and that alone, to Holiness and Justice. Holiness, to love your dispensation—for Nature brought it to you and you to it; Justice, freely and without circumlocution both to speak the truth and to

<sup>4</sup> For a wonderful discussion of what this formulation looks like in practice, consider reading Dorothy Sayers’ classic essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning” (Sayers, 1948).



do the things that are according to law and according to worth. And be not hampered by another's evil, his judgement, or his words, much less by the sensation of the flesh that has formed itself about you—let the part affected look to itself. If then, when you arrive at last at your final exit, resigning all else, you honour your governing self alone and the divine element within you, if what you dread is not that someday you will cease to live, but rather never to begin at all to live with Nature, you will be a man worthy of the Universe that gave you birth, and will cease to be a stranger in your own country, surprised by what is coming to pass every day, as at something you did not look to see, and absorbed in this thing or in that.” (Marcus, 1992, Book XII.1, p. 88)<sup>5</sup>

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5 This work by the Roman philosopher-emperor remains one of the greatest works on statesmanship ever written. It is still carried into the field by officer-statesmen today, not least retired Marine Corps General and former Secretary of Defense, James Mattis.

## Appendix A: White Paper

### THE HUMAN CONDITION, CULTURES, AND SOCIETIES

Following their four-year course of study at the Air Force Academy, our graduates will be required to interact successfully with a wide range of individuals, to include those representing cultures and societies different from their own. To foster their success in these interactions, the Academy has created a three-phased approach to help cadets better understand the human condition, cultures, and societies. The first phase has to do with knowing oneself, where cadets are required to examine their own identity as human beings, citizens in a republic, and officer-statesmen in the United States Air Force. The second phase has to do with knowing others, where cadets begin to examine the identity of others, to include those from cultures and societies different from their own. Each of these first two phases is necessary to accomplish the third phase, which involves constructive engagement with others. Being able to prudently interact with individuals from different milieus resides at the heart of intercultural or cross-cultural competence and includes both domestic and international environments.

#### USAF GRADUATES WILL BE ABLE TO:<sup>6</sup>

##### *Know Oneself*

Proficiency 1: Describe key elements of their own identity as human beings, citizens of a republic, and officer-statesmen in the United States Air Force.

Proficiency 2: Explain historical, cultural, societal, and political developments that have shaped their own identity.

Proficiency 3: Distinguish between objective (universally true) and subjective (biased) elements of their own identity.

Proficiency 4: Defend or critique both objective and subjective elements of their own identity.

##### *Know Others*

Proficiency 5: Describe key elements of an identity different from one's own.

Proficiency 6: Explain historical, cultural, social, and political developments that have shaped another's identity.

Proficiency 7: Distinguish between objective (universally true) and subjective (biased) elements of another's identity.

Proficiency 8: Defend or critique both objective and subjective elements of another's identity.

##### *Constructive Engagement*

Proficiency 9: Explain the uniqueness and interconnections of various peoples, cultures, and societies in their appropriate spatial and temporal contexts.

Proficiency 10: Respond prudently to various cultural and social scenarios, settings, and situations, whether in the classroom or in the field.

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<sup>6</sup> These proficiencies incorporated elements of the American Association of Colleges and Universities Essential Learning Outcomes ([www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes](http://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes)).



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