

FEATURE ARTICLE

Aligning, Integrating, and Synthesizing Leadership Development Education at the U.S. Air Force Academy: A Small Success Story

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ABSTRACT

This article responds to internal calls for leadership curriculum integration at the US Air Force Academy as well the Air and Space Force strategic system alignment of performance expectations to develop leaders capable of adapting to leadership's complexity within people and organizations. This summary provides an update on

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our progress and continued efforts at integration and alignment across multiple fronts. It shows initial efforts at integration between academic departments and mission elements (academic, military, and athletic areas) in response to the demand for excellence in leadership to meet Air and Space Force requirements. We rely upon systems thinking, boundary spanning relationships, and persistence for our pursuit. We explain what we have learned while laying the groundwork for our systems-based approach to leadership and how boundary spanning relationships and partnerships have enriched the cadet leadership curriculum. We conclude by laying out the next steps for our integration as dogged persistence would prescribe in an organization that demands continuous improvement and strategic relevance.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Curriculum Integration, Systems Thinking, Strategic Alignment

Introduction

“We’re not integrating!” was the battle cry of our cross functional group’s founder, Col Gary Packard, then Vice Dean of Strategy and Integration. The United States Air Force Academy’s (USAFA) rigorous program of academics, military, athletics, and character development leads cadets to complete their 47-month experience with a sophisticated combination of knowledge and abilities that will allow them to succeed as members of the profession of arms and citizens. These are known as the nine Institutional Outcomes¹ and the Academy established interdisciplinary teams to organize and measure ongoing progress toward their achievement in our graduates.

The Leadership, Teamwork, and Organizational Management (LTOM) Outcome team was charged with integrating likely the most ubiquitous, ill-defined outcome, “leadership.” Approaching the 2019 National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) Packard put his voice into words in an article “Moving Beyond the Status Quo: Leveraging the Leadership, Teamwork, & Organizational Management Outcome at the U.S. Air Force Academy to Improve Leadership Education and Training” published in the *Journal of Character and Leadership Development*.² He made the case that

USAFA was not effectively integrating leadership development across our portfolio of education, training, and experiences. Many of us took this as a call to action, but still tripped over our experiences and professional disciplines.

To move toward that integration, we lay out next steps in a systems-based approach for teaching leadership at USAFA. This summary provides an update on our progress and continued efforts at integration and alignment across multiple fronts. We show initial efforts at integration between academic departments and mission elements (academic, military, and athletic areas) in response to the demand for excellence in leadership to meet Air and Space Force requirements. We explain what we have learned while laying the groundwork for our own systems-based approach to leadership. Next, we share how the boundary spanning relationships and partnerships have enriched the cadet leadership curriculum. Finally, we map out the next steps for our integration as dogged persistence would prescribe.

While we share the ongoing efforts, we conclude that continued leadership development in alignment with the duties and expectations framework depicted by the major performance areas (Figure 1) remains vital to develop leaders capable of adapting to the complex nature of leadership in the Air and Space Forces.

1 A description of each of the outcomes can be found at: <https://www.usafa.edu/academics/outcomes/>

2 <https://jclausafa.org/index.php/jcld/article/view/136>

Figure 1
Visual Depiction of AFI 1-2 Commander's Duties and Responsibilities from AFI 90-201 Major Graded Areas (2018).



Systems Thinking: Our Initial Challenge and Discovering the Air Force System

If you were asked to create a course on leadership for future officers like we were a few years ago, what would you include? If you are an experienced leader, you may reflect on your experience as a starting point. If not, maybe you would read popular books on leadership written by leaders that you admire. As engaged scholars, our starting point was scholarly articles and textbooks on leadership. What we found was an immeasurable number of approaches to leadership and its cultivation. Some work focuses on traits of leaders, others on values, and still others on leader behaviors. Both narrow and broad explanations of “what leadership is” have emerged in the literature. Beyond the challenge of empirically driven leadership development, there are countless celebrity leadership promoters that claim simple and key ingredients for success as a leader. As leadership instructors, we make no claim that leadership is simple as an axiom or a process. It most certainly is not. As faculty at the U.S. Air Force Academy tasked with creating a leadership capstone course for senior cadets, and as might be expected, we simply were not able to thoroughly review

all the literature and explore all possibilities for our course. We found that developing a leadership course can be a more daunting and overwhelming task than we imagined. What would due diligence when exploring leadership knowledge even look like?

By good fortune, that exploration was focused as we created Leadership 400, the Organizational Dynamics Capstone for the Air Force Academy. The Air Force developed Air Force Instruction 1-2, *Air Force Culture: Commander's Responsibilities* where it defines Air Force culture and operationalizes it with four major performance areas and commander's responsibilities: executing the mission, leading people, managing resources, and improving the unit (Figure 1). In addition to the responsibilities of the commander, these performance areas will serve as “day one” expectations for graduates of USAFA because they are the framework Air and Space Force units are expected to use to assess themselves. Since the four given performance areas are shared by both organizations and its leaders, the Air and Space Forces have carefully crafted an organizational system to convey expectations and assess Airmen, Guardians and their units. Although

this system was in place since 2014, it was not utilized to its fullest extent.

Members from across the Air Force Academy, as part of the LTOM working group, continued to see the question of how to teach leadership from our own experiences or disciplinary lenses despite being implored to integrate.

USAFA's purpose is to develop leaders of character for the U.S. Air and Space Forces. Our cadets demand relevance in this charge. By that, we should deliberately be infusing Air Force and Space Force culture and governance into our leadership development processes. While time and space will not allow discussion of the Department of the Air Force's deliberate reinforcement of performance expectations, below are the seminal research reports, instructions, and policies that create a system of coherent actions defined by performance.

AFI 1-1 <i>Air Force Standards</i> , (2012)
RAND study, <i>Charting the Course for a New Air Force Inspection System</i> , (2013)
AFI 1-2, <i>AF Culture: Commander's Responsibilities</i> , (2014)
AFI 90-201, <i>The Air Force Inspection System</i> (2015, Updated 2021)
Airman Leadership Qualities and the Airman Comprehensive Assessment Addendum

These contributions clearly convey the aspirational Air Force culture of initiative, collaboration, and continuous improvement. The given system alignment helps to fill gaps in system understanding and leadership. Furthermore, in addition to the direction of Air Force leadership, the conceptualization of performance in this way corresponds to literature. The performance areas closely align to leadership scholar Gary Yukl's hierarchical taxonomy of four meta-categories (2012). The Air Force framework (mission, people, resources and improvement) broadens

the focus from solely individualistic models of leadership that rely upon fostering relationships and trust to a mutually supporting systems approach that recognizes how these relationships are impacted by the structure of the organization, the environment, and the culture. This framework not only allows for effective interpersonal behaviors but also explains other factors that impact the timeless call to take care of people.

Boundary Spanning Relationships: Persistently Refining the Systems Framework with Creation of Leadership Capstone and Institutional Partnership

For decades, cadets took a single academic class on leadership during their junior year taught by the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership (DFBL). That tradition recently changed when the institution decided to break that one semester (40 lessons) course into four 10 lesson courses that would be distributed across all academic years to provide "just-in-time" education, tailored to the appropriate level of leadership that a cadet is experiencing. As a result and to the credit of Packard's boundary spanning call, DFBL invited the Department of Management (DFMA) to teach the 10-lesson senior level course, Leadership 400 Organizational Dynamics, to the cadets that lead the cadet wing. The cadet core Leadership courses 100, 200, 300 and 400 are built around the application of behavioral and social science to achieve the aspirations of our Leader of Character Framework³: Live honorably – Lift others and – Elevate performance.

The Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership teaches courses at the 100 (personal), 200 (interpersonal), and 300 (team and organization) leadership levels using a behavioral science lens. The DFMA teaches the 10-lesson senior-level capstone, Leadership 400, focusing on the complexity of organizational leadership from an organizational management perspective. To synergize that curriculum, the DFMA Leadership

³ <https://www.usafa.edu/character/>

400 team meet regularly with members of DFBL teams teaching Leadership 100–300 as part of the Leadership, Teamwork and Organizational Management integration team. In addition, to further work for institutional integration qualified members of the Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) were invited to teach courses at each level of Leadership 100–400. While these steps may not seem significant at first glance, they were seismic as they broke down stovepipes across the institution and fostered collaboration. At last, collaboration across mission elements began to occur and leadership is viewed as inherently interdisciplinary.

To effectively judge leadership approaches, a leader's actions and the system they create must manifest itself in an elevation of performance, interpersonally and organizationally. Understanding the weight of the Academy's mission to develop leaders of character, all leadership classes assert the application of multidisciplinary concepts, with Leadership 400 as the leadership capstone course. Based on that interdisciplinary fact, and with the trust fostered as a result of the work on the core curriculum, other collaborations have become possible. For instance, we evaluated the courses for the Air Officers Commanding (AOCs) who are the commanders, counselors, and role models of active duty service within the cadet squadrons. These officers complete a Master's Program which was rebuilt so the cadets' commanders have a graduate level mastery of the material, concepts, and knowledge from the cadet's Core Leadership Courses. This includes a final course taught in a DFBL/DFMA collaboration. Top graduates from the program will be qualified as instructors in the leadership 100 through 400 course sequence.

Additional integration of the overall leadership curriculum includes USAFA's CCLD taking on Cadet Leadership Enrichment Seminar (CLES) formerly run through the DFBL. CLES is the professional development series designed for cadet commanders. The program design makes facilitators not only available

to help cadets reflect and internalize their leadership lessons but also to serve as advisors in any capacity the cadets need. CLES facilitators now come to CCLD from across the institution to help incoming cadet squadron commanders plan and prepare for their new role. CCLD has expanded the one-day CLES seminar into a semester-long experience for cadet squadron commanders. Furthermore, USAFA now has Air University (AU) officers acting as liaisons looking for opportunities to align and integrate leadership development.

While USAFA makes adjustments, we are mindful of the evolving missions and policy changes of the Air and Space Forces. AU provides the full spectrum of Air Force education from pre-commissioning programs for new officers to graduate programs in specialized military disciplines as well as progressive, career-long professional military development for officer, enlisted, and civilian Airmen (PACE, 2020). In summer 2020, two liaison officers from Air University arrived at USAFA to strengthen collaboration and partnerships between these leadership development institutions (Drawdy, 2019). Their arrival coincided with the Leadership 400 tectonic shifts and collaboration between DFBL, DFMA, and CCLD. The partnership is valuable because both AU and USAFA are focused on operationalizing the Air Forces core values in performance and developing proficiencies in our leadership development. The liaisons look to find synergies and share best practices. For instance, Air University's portfolio of military and academic specialties enables USAFA to rely upon disciplines such as leadership, followership, diversity, inclusion, ethics, and innovation that align well with USAFA's Developing Leaders of Character Framework (Clark, 2021) to live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance. Each have value in crafting a systems approach to ongoing leadership development initiatives that increase the collective capacity of organizations (Day et al., 2014).

Dogged Persistence: Next Steps in Integration

In reality, our job is to help cadets develop as leaders and make sense of their leadership experiences at the Academy. To account for all of the missions and disciplines at the institution as well as prepare them for a myriad of potential careers they could enter into upon graduation, Leadership core course directors (100–400) in DFBL and DFMA created a comprehensive set of themes across Leadership courses that will equip cadets to apply their lessons in leadership with a broad systems lens:

- People are complex and greater diversity adds complexity and value.
- People are motivated to engage when they feel their contributions are valued.
- Organizations are shifting coalitions of people with diverse interests and goals.
- Leaders help align group and individual interests with organizational goals.
- Organizations are complex systems.
- Systems produce what they are deliberately or inadvertently designed to create.
- Leaders are the architect of both the system and the behavior within it.

The assessment framework pictured in Figure 1 also provides a tangible target for officer candidates because it holds the immediate expectations for leaders in the Air and Space Forces. Furthermore, the Academy's Leader of Character framework challenges those at the Air Force Academy to develop leaders of character. Enroute to developing leaders who live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance, the framework challenges individuals *and* the organization to “assess.” Conveniently, AFI 1-2 points us to the standards of competence for leader assessment, superseding disciplinary theoretical preferences and a roadmap to begin to assess our program. Currently, the LTOM team is working to map where the proficiencies of mission, people, resources, and continuous improvement are

introduced, developed, and mastered in our course of instruction. Once this is completely mapped, we can find efficiencies and build synergies across their Academy experiences and, thus, deepen cadets' proficiencies as they join the profession of arms.

Conclusion

The Air and Space Forces require leaders that can execute the mission, lead people, manage resources, and improve their units. By aligning USAFA's core leadership and leadership capstone courses with organizational management, psychology, and sociological concepts and Air Force culture and practices, we are developing leaders who are ready to answer that call. In fact, the current Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) reinforced this systematic approach in new Air Force strategy documents and personnel system changes. In *Accelerate Change or Lose Action Items*, General Brown has declared the need for continuous improvement at all levels with his statement that Air Force leaders must “empower our incredible Airmen to solve any problem” (2020). Delivering on that goal, in February 2021 General Brown institutionalized the use of Airman Leadership Qualities for officer and enlisted evaluations: Airmen will “adjust to changing conditions,” “achieve an inclusive climate,” and think creatively about different ways to solve problems (Cohen, 2021). These expectations demand not only results, but a culture of mutual respect and human dignity by which these results must be attained. By this action, individual and organizational assessment are aligned. The Chief's actions should ignite our urgency to equip cadets with a broad systems understanding of human and organizational performance so cadets can assess individuals and their organization with a lens that enables them to look for better solutions in their squadron, team, club, and, most importantly, in their profession as officers. This article described our journey, thus far to help make the Chief's vision a reality at the U.S. Air Force Academy. While, we are proud

of the small successes we described here, we still have a ways to go.

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