RESEARCH

A Systematic Review of Leadership Curriculum at the U.S. Air Force Academy from 1955 to 1980

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ABSTRACT

"Growing strong leaders and resilient families" is one of four strategic priorities of the United States Air Force, as it postures to operate within the Great Power Competition Environment. Among leadership development milestones, pre-commissioning sources are foundational experiences for officers, of which the United States Air Force Academy remains a primary pillar. The purpose of this research was to determine how influential civilian advancements in leadership theory impacted the curriculum of the academy from 1955 to 1980, which was a period of rapid evolution of leadership theory from behavioral, through contingent and situational, to transactional and transformational leadership theories. With approval from the Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership, a systematic review was conducted of course material for core courses from 1955 to 1980, which included course syllabi, course descriptions, lesson plans, and required reading material. The Behavioral Science and Leadership curriculum at the Air Force Academy was very responsive to civilian advancements in leadership theory, often integrating emerging theories into

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the curriculum within 2 years after the publication of theory-defining works. The Air Force Academy has a history of an adaptable curriculum responsive to emerging research findings, which allowed the program to keep pace with leading civilian institutions. As we navigate a potential post-transformational leadership era, the Air Force Academy should continue to stay abreast of emerging research to maintain a proactive leadership development curriculum that supports the Air Force's strategic priorities.

Keywords: Leadership, Curriculum, Learning, USAFA, DFBL

The United States Air Force (USAF) highlighted four strategic priorities to posture the force for success within the Great Power Competition environment (U.S. Air Force, n.d.), which is where major world powers compete for global diplomatic, military, and economic influence to shape international relations The third of these priorities is to *"Grow strong leaders and resilient families."* Since the Air Force rescinded Air Force Doctrine Document 1-1 *"Leadership and Force Development "* in 2021, the USAF has lacked an organizational definition for leadership, which impacted how USAF leaders are developed and assessed. However, the genesis of leadership development for all commissioned officers begins with one of three commissioning sources: Reserve Officer Training School for cadets attending civilian universities, Officer Training School for college graduates, and the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA; U.S. Air Force, 2023). To help answer how the Air Force can grow strong leaders, this systematic review explores the formative leadership development experiences gained through the commissioning process, then considers how past curriculum evolutions could inform future updates to best balance civilian research advancements and leadership challenges unique to the military.

Of the three commissioning sources, the USAFA is the focus of this review because it provides the most standardized leadership development experience for cadets with the fewest external variables. In the following sections, curriculum from the Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership (DFBL), between the years of 1959 and 1980, were examined for influence from civilian advancements through the evolution of leadership eras.

Review of Leadership Theories

The evolution of leadership theories has been extensively studied. This article synthesizes two reviews, by Nawaz et al. (2016) as well as Benmira and Agboola (2021), which both detailed the major leadership theories from the Trait Theory through the transformational leadership theory. Since this review focuses on the evolution of the curriculum at the USAFA from 1955 to 1980, it was assumed trait-based leadership theories, which faded out in the 1940's and presumed that leaders are born instead of developed, did not heavily influence the curriculum. Instead, this research looked for evidence primarily from the behavioral leadership theory, situational and contingent leadership theories, and transactional and transformational leadership theories.

Behavioral leadership theory, which was prominent during the 1940s–1950s, broke with the assumption that leaders are born with certain traits and characteristics associated with leadership, and instead argued leaders could be made. Specific behaviors of successful leaders could be taught to develop overall effectiveness, regardless of situation or environment (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). In addition to being one of the pioneers of social psychology, Kurt Lewin was also influential in the development of behavioral leader-

ship theory and researched the behavioral responses of group members from different leadership styles (Lewin et al., 1939).

However, by the mid-1960s researchers started to acknowledge that there was not a one size fits all approach to leadership, and that unique situations and environments impacted successful leadership (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Nawaz et al., 2016), which led to the development of three primary theories: situational, path-goal, and contingent leadership theories. In these theories, the relationship between the leader, the subordinates, and the organizational environment all play key factors. Hersey and Blanchard (1969) shaped situational leadership and argued that subordinates shaped the relationship, and leaders needed to be able to adjust leadership styles to the situation. House and Evans' (1971) path-goal theory posited that leaders could adaptively use four primary leadership styles and a clear path to reach objectives to support followers in achieving goals. Fiedler (1964) was the pioneer of contingent leadership theory, and argued that leaders were the more dominant focus of the relationship, and focused less on leaders changing styles, but of the importance of matching a leader to the situation, based on the leadership style required.

Transactional leadership emerged in the late 1970's and focused more specifically on the nature of the relationship between leader and follower as a transaction (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Nawaz et al., 2016). Leaders were able to leverage authority to motivate subordinates through an exchange of rewards for meeting expectations and punishments for failure to meet expectations. Transactional leadership theory is credited to Burns (1978), though Bass (1985) expanded on the framework with the introduction of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership theory introduces the idea of achieving the greater good of the organization through motivating and inspiring subordinates to align their goals

with that of the organization's values. Bass and Avolio (1990) would go on to create the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, which is still recognized as the primary leadership research instrument in the field (Kasema & Suviste, 2020).

Methodology

This systematic review researched archival material owned by DFBL at USAFA, and stored within the Clark Special Collections section of the McDermott Library. The primary reference sources available were volumes from the planning board study predating the establishment of USAFA, Air Force Academy Catalogs that were available to the public and provided a general admissions and program overview, "Curriculum Handbooks" that were for faculty and cadet use which gave more specific graduation and course requirements, and the archived departmental material. Material from the years 1955 to 1980 were targeted due to the significant civilian research advancements in the areas of leadership theories. Due to the extensive amount of material to review, the following methodology was used to systematically prioritize which resources were studied, and which information was extracted from each source.

The USAFA Curriculum Handbooks were referenced through 1980 to determine what DFBL requirements were for all students. DFBL had numerous electives, and different majors required additional courses; however, because not all students took these courses, they are outside the scope of this review. A prioritized list of core course requirements was developed, which drove a more targeted examination from the DFBL course material. While reviewing the material, themes and sources were identified to determine if curriculum was influenced by civilian research advancements. Prioritized material included annotated bibliographies, textbooks and selected readings, course reference lists, and course descriptions. Lower priority material included student handouts, discussion and study questions. Final

course grades and other personally identifying information, as well as homework and assessment questions were excluded completely.

Results and Discussion

A systematic review of the available curriculum resources from DFBL during the years 1955 to 1980 identified the amount of influence civilian advancements in the fields of leadership had on the USAFA curriculum. The first available curriculum list was found in *"Air Force Academy Planning Board Study: The Curriculum"* (1949), where the stated purpose of the curriculum design was to *"enable every Air Force officer, regardless of his specialty, to represent the Air Force advantageously, in any educated group, at home or abroad, either socially or officially."* The first Curriculum Handbook was developed for the years 1955–1958, after which it was updated on an annual basis.

Table 1 below illustrates what the core DFBL curriculum requirements were for graduation for all cadets attending the USAFA. Table 2 provides significant course names and changes throughout the years. To understand the tables, it is important to note the name of the department changed several times throughout the years. Originally the Department of Leadership Studies, it changed to Psychology (1961), to Behavioral Sciences (1962), to Psychology and Leadership (1965), to Department of Life and Behavioral Sciences (1971), and finally to Behavioral Sciences and Leadership (1975). Additionally, since the course *"Psychology of Family Relations"* was eventually moved to the Department of Sociology (1968), it was excluded from more in-depth analysis. Lastly, while the original curriculum proposal included four classes totaling 8 semester credit hours, the implemented curriculum only reached a total of three courses and 6 credits (1976).

The targeted list of DFBL courses taken by all cadets was developed from the core requirements and provided the initial focus of the expansive departmental materials. Unfortunately, departmental materials were not available from the years 1955 to 1958, when USAFA was based out of Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado. To narrow the material reference further, more in depth focus was given for new courses, or when course titles were changed. Material for years without change were skimmed to identify any significant curriculum rewrites. Generally, civilian leadership theory advancements significantly influenced the curriculum material, but due to the extent of the material an exhaustive list of examples was impractical. Instead, targeted examples are used in the following sections to concisely highlight influences, deviations, and changes chronologically.

Chronological Influence of Leadership Theory Evolution

There is significant evidence from departmental material (1959) that early curriculum was significantly influenced by Behavioral Leadership Theory elements. Within the first set of departmental material for *LS302* (1959), the course objective of the junior-level course was to introduce the psychology of human behavior to leadership abilities through the focus of everyday behaviors. Full course materials were not available for *LS302*, but lesson topics (e.g., introduction to motivated behavior, the self and behavior, intelligence and behavior, etc) reinforce this assessment. Additionally, in the other required course, *LS301* (1959) a recommended reading list of books, from which excerpts were pulled from to develop the course reading. Table 3 lists books, authored by prominent authors in the management field, from the list. The course material reinforced the importance behaviors and roles of leaders and managers are at a general level.

In 1965, while the influence of leadership research into situational leadership were observable, the curriculum of *Beh Sci 302* would best be described as in early transition. The primary textbook was *"Principles of Management"* by Koontz and O'Donnell (1964) and the majority of the

Table 1

Core Graduation Requirements for Cadets at USAFA

Starting Year	Core Course Requirements	Credit Total	Notes
Planning Study Proposal	Piych 101,102. 301, 302	8	
1955-1958	Principles of Human Behavior, Applicabon to Leadership and Personnel Management	5	
1959	Leadership Studies 301, 302,400*	N/A	• Curriculum Handbook not available, and assessed from numbering of courses in departmental material and Course Titles
1960	N/A*	N/A	• Curriculum Handbook not available. While Departmental Material available, due to increased number of total offered classes and different course numbering, could not assess which were core requirements
1961	Psych 201, 302	5.5	
1962	Psych 201, 302	5.5	
1963	Beh Sci 203, 302, 303	5.5	
1964	Beh Sci 203, 302, 304	5.5	
1965	Beh Sci 203, 302, 304	5.5	
1966	Beh Sci 203, 302, 304	5.5	
1967	Beh Sci 203, 302, 304	5.5	
1968	Psych 100, 302	5	
1969	Psych 100, 302	5	
1970	Psych 301, 302	5	
1971	Psych 301, 302	5	
1972	Beh Sci 301, 302	5	
1973	Beh Sci 211, 302	5*	• Credits for Beh Sci 211 varried based on if it was taken in fall or spring semester
1974	Beh Sci 211, 302	5*	• Credits for Beh Sci 211 varried based on if it was taken in fall or spring semester

(*Continued*)

Table 1

Core Graduation Requirements for Cadets at USAFA

Starting Year	Core Course Requirements	Credit Total	Notes
1975	Beh Sci 211, 302*	5	• Pages identifying core requirements were missing from Curriculum Handbook, assessed no change due to all course offerings in the Department remaining the same from 1974
1976	Beh Sci 110, 220,330	6	
1977	Beh Sci 110, 220,330	6	
1978	Beh Sci 110, 220, 330	6	
1979	Beh Sci 110, 220,330	6	
1980	Beh Sci 110, 220,330	6	

Note. Created by author from information compiled from *Curriculum Handbook* by USAFA (1955–1980) and *Air Force Academy Planning Board Study Volume 2: The Curriculum* (p. vii) by Headquarters The Air University (1949).

course still referenced foundational works from the early 1950's and reflected more of the traditional behavioral leadership theory. However, in the Instructor Handbook for *Lesson 19: Introduction to Leadership* the entire first paragraph of the instructor note discussed the shift in leadership research toward situational leadership theory, where the "where" and "under what circumstances" were of at least equal importance to "who" was leading. This lesson explored the situational aspects of leadership and introduced the concept that one size does not fit all when it comes to leadership. This is significant because this was only 1 year after the Fiedler (1964) published his groundbreaking article.

By 1970, the influence of situational leadership theory on the curriculum was dominant in *Psych 302*. In the *Course Overview* earlier leadership theories were resoundingly critiqued. Trait based leadership theory was identified as "discredited" as an approach of studying the traits of successful leaders. Following that, it was specified that universal leaders do not exist

and successful leadership is based on the individual, the followers, the organization, and the socio-cultural environment. The course material also consisted of articles such as *"Contemporary Trends in the Analysis of Leadership Process"* by Hollander and Julian (1969), which critiqued Lewin's behavioral leadership theory, and advocates for situational leadership, as well as the article *"Style or Circumstance: The Leadership Enigma"* by Fred Fiedler (1969), one of the pioneers of contingent leadership theory.

By 1975 *Beh Sci 302* had undergone another name change, yet the influence from situational leadership era remained dominant. A very similar introduction still provided early contrast to trait and behaviorist leadership theories by addressing leadership myths. Additionally, instead of just incorporating articles that advocated a shift from behavioral leadership theory to a more situational approach, the lesson schedule included a lesson specifically on Fiedler's situational model, and continued lessons covering the relationships between leader,

Table 2

Course Information and Changes to Core Graduation Requirements at USAFA

Starting Year	Course Identifier	Course Name	Notes
Planning Study Proposal	Psych 101	Basic Principles of Military Psychology	Proposed Course
	Psych 102	Applied Military Psychology	Proposed Course
	Psych 301	Psychology of Morale and Leadership	Proposed Course
	Psych 302	Psychology of Morale and Leadership	Proposed Course
1955	N/A	Principles of Human Behavior	Initial Course
	N/A	Application to Leadership and Personnel Management	Initial Course
1959	LS 301	Leadership Studies	New Course
	LS 302	Personnel Management	New Course
	LS 400	Basic Cadet Instruction	New Course
1961	Psych 201	Psychology of Human Behavior	New Course
	Psych 302	Human Relations in Management	New Course
1962	Psych 201	Psychology of Individual Behavior	Name Change
1963	Beh Sci 203	General Psychology	New Course
	Beh Sci 302	Human Relations in Management	Psych 301
	Beh Sci 303	Psychology of Family Relations	New Course
1964	Beh Sci 304	Psychology of Family Relations	Updated Identifier
1966	Beh Sci 302	Human Relations and leadership	Name Change
1968	Psych 100	General Psychology	Beh Sci 203
	Soc 304	Sociology of Family Relations	Moved Departments
1970	Psych 301	General Psychology	Updated Identifier
	Psych 302	Command Development 1: Leadership Process	New Course
1972	Beh Sci 301	General Psychology	Psych 301
	Beh Sci 302	Applied Behavioral Science in the Military Environment	Name Change
1973	Beh Sci 211	General Psychology	Updated Identifier
1976	Beh Sci 110	General Psychology	Updated Identifier
	Beh Sci 220	Behavioral Science Application to Leadership Phase 1	Updated Identifier / Name Change
	Beh Sci 330	Behavioral Science Application to Leadership Phase 2	Updated Identifier / Name Change

Note. Created by author from information compiled from *Curriculum Handbook* by USAFA (1955–1980) and *Air Force Academy Planning Board Study Volume 2: The Curriculum* (p. vii) by Headquarters The Air University (1949).

Table 3

Selected Highlights from the Recommended Reading List

Author	Title	Year
H. Koontz & C. O'Donnell	Principles of Management	1955
R. Davis	The Fundementals of Top Management	1951
H. Simon	Administrative Behavior	1951
F.J. Roethlisberger & W. Dickson	Management and the Worker	1939
0. Tead	The Art of Administration	1951

Note. Created by Author from Departmental Materials (1959) for LS302 *"Recommended Books on Leadership, Management, and Social Psychology."*

organization, and group. There were still two lessons on behaviorist approaches to leadership in the *"Feedback and Reward Systems"* block of instruction, but the overall goal of the course was to develop situational leaders.

By 1980 *Beh Sci 302* expanded into two required courses with significant change, *Beh Sci 220* and *Beh Sci 330*. *Beh Sci 220* introduced cadets to task issues that deal with group leadership, while *Beh Sci 330* covered the interpersonal aspects of group leadership. In the introduction to *Beh Sci 220*, three differences stood out. First was a clear explanation of the difference between management and leadership. Secondly, the course provided a definition of "The ability to influence people to achieve organizational and personal goals." Lastly, the advancements in leadership research in the civilian side were deliberately studied. Six lessons were set aside to broadly cover the history of leadership theory, and separate lessons were devoted to Fiedler's contingency theory, the influential Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory, and House's Path-Goal Theory, which are all part of the situational leadership era. Additionally, lesson 20 was devoted to Transactional Leadership, which was an emerging leadership theory, which would eventually herald in the transformational era.

Moving Forward

The United States Air Force continues to prioritize development of strong leaders to operate within the Great Power Competition environment, and commissioning sources remain an important aspect of talent acquisition and initial leadership development. The goal of this systematic review was to consider how past curriculum evolutions could inform future updates to best balance civilian research advancements and leadership challenges unique to the military. The results found indications the leadership curriculum was responsive to emerging academic research. DFBL updated the curriculum within 2 years of the first major releases of situational and transactional leadership theories. The course heavily relied on textbooks, books, and articles used in civilian institutions.

Future Research

Future research could expand this work by exploring the homework and assessment portions of the departmental material. Assessment is one of the primary aspects of learning science, and significant insight could be gained through assessing the weighted grading systems, along with how exam questions are written to align with the learning objectives of the course. Future research in the evolution of leadership development would best be supported by the expansion of research into other departments. During research, several other departments might provide additional insight into not only how leadership theory was taught, but also practiced. Courses in business management were not part

of DFBL and might provide additional information. Additionally, the department of Military Training would provide a look at how the cadet training outside of the classroom was incorporating leadership styles and practices to provide a more complete picture.

This research remains relevant as leadership theory is undergoing research that might lead to the next evolution into a post-transformational era. With the advancement of Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and Automation, coupled to the massive shift to telework that many companies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, transformational leadership is being redefined in the modern workplace. By looking back to learn how past evolutions of theory were incorporated, USAFA has the opportunity to have a proactive strategy that would keep its education on pace or ahead of civilian institutions.

As the Air Force adapts to operating within the Great Power Competition environment, artificial intelligence has the potential to augment conventional, cyber, and nuclear capabilities (Schmidt, 2022). While these operational applications of artificial intelligence are outside the scope of this discussion, the impacts to leadership theory and higher education are relevant. Artificial intelligence, automation, and machine learning are redefining leadership by optimizing operational efficiency and supporting data driven decision making (Shwetha, 2024). Still, ethical leadership challenges remain, including lack of transparency and accountability, integrated biases, and organizational change resistance. The challenge of integrating this evolving leadership paradigm, is the military's current stance on leveraging technological advancements within the classroom.

USAFA is uniquely postured to navigate this paradigm shift, by bridging both the civilian and military sectors. Civilian researchers continue to explore how to develop higher education programs integrating artificial intelligence addressing the accompanying ethical challenges (McGrath et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Slimi & Car-

ballido, 2023). Professional Military Education (PME) faces similar challenges across development levels and branches of service. Throughout this transitional period, USAFA could support positive change by continuing to monitor ongoing civilian research efforts and continually refine its program to be adaptable to the changing environment. This would not just benefit USAFA but could be adapted throughout the PME enterprise.

Where USAFA can add to this body of knowledge, is the ability to demonstrate *how* such leadership theory advancements can enhance learning outcomes throughout the cadet wing, through practical application. This would better prepare future officers to understand how to balance emerging data-centric leadership theory without losing the proven benefits of a transformational approaches, which will be vital in the Great Power Competition environment. It would also combat long term organizational resistance to change by shaping a more informed generation of adaptable leaders. USAFA's proactive history to leadership advancements should inspire them to continue leading the way as they enter this next period of change.

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