

PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

Notes Afloat Aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Eagle: A Premier Floating Leadership Laboratory

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Leader development at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy for this former Army officer, truly is something special. After just 1 year on the job, I have fallen in love with the Academy, its mission, the Cadets, faculty, staff, coaches, crew of the Barque Eagle, and the United States Coast Guard. Let me share with you my observations of the amazing leadership experience afloat on the USCGC Eagle at this small but mighty federal service academy on the Thames River in New London, Connecticut.

Leader Preparation

Just days on the job in 2023, I observed the leadership curriculum in action in the Mid-Grade Cadet Transition Course (MCTC). One which every 2/c Cadet (rising junior) must complete before becoming cadre, before taking charge of trainees in one of 14 core experiential programs, such as SWAB Summer, Waterfront, Eagle, etc. After completing Organizational Behavior & Leadership in the classroom, where 3/c Cadets (sophomores) study leadership theory and models, contemplate their application, and work toward developing their own leader framework, MCTC applies case studies and utilizes role play to solidify theory in action. Second-class cadets rehearse their roles as teacher-leader and mentor by understanding DiSC profiles, delivering leadership models, and core values lessons prior to donning their red aiguillettes and assuming the title, Cadre.

Fast-forward 1 year, this summer with a much better understanding of the Coast Guard Academy Leadership Development Program (CGALDP), I set sail for the first time ever under way on the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter, Barque Eagle.

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A Floating Leadership Laboratory

The Eagle is a 295-foot, three-masted square rigger built in 1936. As one of the Academy's core experiential programs, its primary mission is to develop leaders of character and train cadets for commissioning as officers in the United States Coast Guard. It is home to a full-time crew of 60 officers and enlisted—highly trained Coast Guardsmen who take great pride in their work, in training and developing cadets, and in their ship. They display exceptional professionalism, technical proficiency and camaraderie, which appears to stem directly from the quality command climate set by their Captain.

There are 21 1/c cadets (seniors at the Academy) aboard Eagle for the summer training program where for the first time, they are treated like junior officers. The crew provides cadets a unique opportunity to observe practitioners, establish professional relationships, ask questions, have discussions, and experience immersive leadership development while at sea.

Embracing their role aboard Eagle prepares 1/c cadets to assume leadership positions in their final year at the Academy where the Corps leads the Corps. Unlike most other academy graduates, Coast Guard Ensigns go directly to the fleet, immediately assuming a leadership role, while junior officers in other services often receive additional formal military schooling before joining an operational unit. 1/c cadets at the Coast Guard Academy are expected to lead with integrity in accordance with the core values of the service – Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. They enforce standards for the under classes, while also holding themselves and their peers accountable. They receive mentorship from the officers and crew, set goals and expectations, receive feedback, and a final assessment on performance, leadership growth, and technical proficiency.

The Curriculum

The Coast Guard Academy follows the LEAD Strategy in developing Leaders of Character. L – Learn from

Theory; E – Experience through Practice; A – Analyze using Reflection, and D – Deepen understanding through Mentoring. Each of these is on full display onboard Eagle as cadets learn the nuances of sailing a traditionally rigged barque and the demands of life at sea. As division members, 3/c cadets practice hands-on leadership – exercising personal responsibility, accountability, followership, self-awareness, teamwork and reflection while learning basic technical seamanship.

3/c cadets are a member of a division, working with others in a stress-induced setting and advancing toward qualifications commensurate with their experience thus far. They man sail stations – set sails, douse sails and brace the yards, depending on wind speed and conditions. They climb rigging, stand watches, drill, train, perform mess duty and ship's work all day long. And they clean – the ship is maintained to an immaculate standard as the permanent crew cares for her with a great sense of pride in their work and in their ship.

For 1/c cadets (rising Seniors), The Eagle summer experience is designed to mirror the routine of a newly commissioned Ensign in the fleet – balancing competing demands of leading a division, performing assigned collateral duties, and earning appropriate qualifications. 1/c cadets are directly responsible for leading 3/c cadets through daily training activities, watch standing, qualifications, day work, while also acting as role models and mentors. These challenges encourage the development and honing of leadership skills such as communications, emotional intelligence, and technical credibility. It just may be the best hands-on experiential program in any academy, college, or university across the country – developing leaders of character, preparing service ready Ensigns for their role as junior officers in the United States Coast Guard.

Eight Days at Sea

I am not an Academy graduate. I don't pretend to know all the hands-on, experiential training opportunities



and leadership programs at the other service academies. I simply reflect on the fact that while aboard Eagle, sailing from Bermuda to Halifax, cadets work round the clock. They study, practice, stand watch, take boards and earn qualifications that will serve them in their first assignment as Ensigns in the fleet and throughout their Coast Guard careers. By the end of their 6-week evolution (some stay for all 11 weeks), 1/c cadets truly run the ship. Initially, under the tutelage and watchful eye of the crew; however, after they earn their qualifications, they are frequently left in charge. 1/c cadets both give and receive mentorship, participate in professional development with the Executive Officer, (the Captain is present most times). They practice reflection and hone their leadership skills and competencies appropriate for their role in the division and class year.

The berthing areas are neither roomy, nor comfortable. There is no wi-fi service; cadets work the mess, and literally swab the deck. They execute sail stations – manually hoisting and turning the masts on a vessel that weighs more than 1,600 tons. They may get seasick; they may get homesick. Most have not had leave or seen their families since March and will not return stateside until August, but it doesn't show. They work round the clock, honing their craft, practicing leadership in preparation for their role at the Academy and upon graduation, in service to the nation.

Still, the Eagle experience is not only about seamanship. With port calls in 9 different territories and countries, plus 3 stateside Cadets welcomed more than 21,000 visitors on board just this past summer alone, giving tours, conducting several outreach events and high-level engagements. While in port, Eagle hosts U.S. Ambassadors, heads of state, and top-ranking military officials in countries of high strategic importance, well representing the U.S. and the Coast Guard.

How Did We Go?

The Coast Guard Academy Leader Development Program utilizes a systems approach, highlighting leadership competencies as inputs, while hands-on experiential programs provide the process. Reflecting on the efficacy of the program, I'd like to highlight outputs and feedback from cadets based on their Eagle experience. A total of 99% of 3/c Cadets completed their required qualifications – a 3% increase over last year. A majority (57%) responded that the unit was invested in their leadership and professional development “a lot” – a 15% increase over last year. When asked the extent to which they practiced the leadership competencies of accountability and responsibility, 83% said frequently – a 22% increase over last summer. A total of 70% reported receiving weekly mentoring.

Reflecting on the best part of the Eagle experience, some top comments from cadets include: “I experienced character development in a stressful environment”; “a crew whose primary mission is to train and mentor cadets”; “getting comfortable with the uncomfortable”; “learning to be responsible for my actions”; “overcoming challenges in difficult situations.”

From the Captain

Jessica Rozzi-Ochs (Class of '00) is the 30th Commanding Officer of USCGC Eagle and the first woman to hold this prestigious post. She stated, “The 1/c cadets were exceptional this summer. They worked incredibly hard, balancing their leadership role as

a Mast Captain or Division Officer, their collateral duty, and their professional qualifications. In addition, they led sail stations, participated in numerous restricted-water transits and other evolutions such as man overboard, etc., and played a critical role in daily shipboard life.”

It seems that the intended outcomes and feedback present strong indicators that the practicum is working and remains a good return on investment for both the Academy and the service. In the eyes of this old Army officer, it truly was a privilege to be a part of something quite special aboard America’s Tall Ship.