

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion: Why Does it Matter to Leadership Development?

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As the new Chief, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Officer at the United States Air Force Academy (USAF), I am often asked why diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) matter. More specifically, I have been asked “Why does DEI matter to USAFA/U.S. Air Force (USAF)/U.S. Space Force (USSF)?” Having served 27 years on active duty, as a social scientist, and as the former USAFA Behavioral Sciences and Leadership Department Head, I can tell you, they matter a great deal. The reasons they matter are many, but for the purposes of this article, I will discuss their importance within the context of three lines of USAFA strategic DEI efforts: Recruitment, Retention/Success, and Development.

Let’s begin with definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion. Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-7001, Diversity & Inclusion, broadly defines *diversity* as:

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...a composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force Mission. Air Force diversity includes, but is not limited to: personal life experiences, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural knowledge, educational background, work experience, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical and spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity, and gender. (U.S. Air Force, 2019, p. 3)

Simply stated, diversity is the representation of individuals from a diverse range of demographic and social identity backgrounds. In the Executive Order on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” equity is defined as:

...the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” (United States Office of the President, 2021)

Equity is often confused with equality. In its simplest form, equality is giving everyone the same (regardless of their unique needs, capabilities, resources, etc.). In contrast, equity seeks to give people what they need to be successful, recognizing that people have unique needs, capabilities, resources, etc. Equity can also

be described as the recognition and elimination of system barriers that produce disparate experiences of belongingness (Nishii, 2021). Finally, Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-7001, Diversity & Inclusion, defines *inclusion* as “The process of creating a culture where all members of an organization are free to make their fullest contributions to the success of the group, and where there are no unnecessary barriers to success” (U.S. Air Force, 2019, p. 3). Inclusion involves an organizational environment that enables individuals to simultaneously experience belonging and feel valued for their unique competencies and perspectives (Nishii, 2021). Having defined our terms of reference, let’s discuss the concepts of DEI within three strategic lines of effort for USAFA: recruitment, retention/success and development.

### **USAFA DEI Line of Effort #1: Recruit students, faculty & staff representative of the diverse talent pool.**

Our first line of strategic DEI effort involves recruiting students, faculty and Airmen representative of the diversity of the talent pool. One may ask, “Why is it important to have a diverse Cadet Wing?” The first reason is that USAFA is in a fierce competition for talent and that talent is increasingly diverse. USAFA is competing with businesses and other universities for the best and brightest our country has to offer. This talent pool of young adults is growing more diverse every year and we will not know if we have attracted our fair share of talent, unless we reflect the diversity of that talent pool. Our nation’s talent is growing increasingly diverse, across race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation/gender identity. With respect to race/ethnicity, of the children born in the United States this year, the racial minority has become the majority (Frey, 2018). In other words, of the children born in the U.S. this year, the number

of newborns of color (African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, etc.) is greater than the number of newborns identified as Caucasian or White. In fact, this tipping point of the racial minority becoming the majority among newborns actually occurred six years ago in 2015 (Frey, 2018). Additionally, based on projections from the Census Bureau, children of color will become the majority for the entire U.S. population below age 18 by 2021 (Frey, 2018). Also, based on similar projections for the population between ages 18-24 (our prime accessions age range for USAFA), young adults of color will become the majority in only a few short years in 2025 (Frey, 2018). Similarly, our future talent pool will be increasingly diverse in terms of gender. While the U.S. population is projected to be relatively stable across gender percentages into the future, USAFA should expect greater gender diversity in our talent pool for a number of reasons. First, within the U.S., women are attending and graduating college at higher rates than men, and this has been true for over 20 years (Matias, 2019). For example, among 2017 college graduates, 57% were women, as compared to only 43% for men (Matias, 2019). Secondly, as of 2016, many more operational military career fields are open to women (Losey, 2016). These factors will very likely result in larger numbers of women in our talent pool. In terms of religious identity, the U.S. population is growing increasingly diverse. Currently, 75.5% of the population identifies as “Christian,” while 18.6% identifies as Atheist/Agnostic and 5.9% identifies as non-Christian (e.g., Jewish-American, Muslim-American, etc.) (Pew, 2021). Based on projections from Pew-Templeton, by 2040, the Atheist/Agnostic and non-Christian groups are expected to increase significantly (up to 23.6% and 7.3%, respectively) (Pew, 2021). Additionally, the Muslim-American population is expected to replace the Jewish-American population as the second largest religious identity group in the

U.S. by 2040 (Pew, 2021). Finally, our talent pool will be increasing diverse in relation to sexual orientation/gender identity. Based on research by Gallup, 5.8% of U.S. millennials identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBTQ+) individuals in 2012 (Gates, 2017). In a follow-up poll in 2016, 7.3% of U.S. millennials identified as LGBT individuals (Gates, 2017). Gallup surmised that the increase was likely due to a greater willingness and openness of millennials to publicly identify as LGBTQ+ than previous generations. Also, the Department of Defense recently decided to remove the ban on service by transgender individuals, which will likely increase the number of transgender people in our talent pool (DoD, 2021). In summary, the talent pool for USAFA is growing increasingly diverse, and unless we reflect the diversity of those young citizens, we risk losing in the competition for our nation’s best and brightest.

The second reason having a diverse Cadet Wing is important is because diversity enhances the educational benefits for all students. The U.S. Supreme Court, in the case *Fisher vs. University of Texas*, outlined “The educational benefits that flow from student body diversity...” including a “robust exchange of ideas; exposure to differing cultures; preparation for the challenges of an increasingly diverse workforce; and acquisition of competencies required of future leaders.” (*Fisher v. UOT*, 2013). As noted by this important case, having a diverse Cadet Wing will enable a “robust exchange of ideas,” as well as “exposure [of our cadets] to differing cultures.” In her book *Diversity’s Promise for Higher Education*, Dr. Daryl Smith outlines the research supporting the benefits of student body diversity on student outcomes. “The research, with a special focus on experiences that engage diversity or where students from different groups interact, consistently shows benefits in terms of student

satisfaction, increased openness to diverse ideas, intellectual engagement, critical thinking, greater tolerance, and personal development” (Smith, 2020, p. 234). Smith goes on to summarize the research on student cognitive complexity, which is enhanced by interactions with “diverse others.” The research showed that experiences with diverse others, because they are difficult and tough, disturbed usual thinking patterns, which is likely to lead to greater cognitive complexity and innovation (Smith, 2020).

While we have demonstrated that diversity in the USAFA student body is important, some may ask, “Why is it important to have a diverse faculty and staff at USAFA?” Similar to the benefits of student diversity, staff/faculty diversity is important because USAFA is in competition for talent among this population — a diverse staff/faculty enhances educational benefits for all students and the need for student role models is vitally important. Similar to the student talent pool, the faculty/staff talent pool is growing increasingly diverse. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, the percentage of racial or ethnic minorities in postsecondary faculty positions rose from 14% to 24% from 1997 to 2017 (Davis & Fry, 2019). Similarly, the percent of women in postsecondary faculty positions increased from 40.7% to 49.6% during the same time (NCES, 2018). These facts, combined with the trends mentioned above, namely the increasing racial/ethnic diversity of the nation’s youth, as well as the fact that women are graduating college at higher rates than men, indicate that the faculty/staff talent pool will continue to grow increasingly diverse. Unless USAFA reflects the changing demographics of this talent pool, we cannot be certain we have competed well for the rich talent available. Secondly, and similar to a diverse Cadet Wing, a diverse faculty/staff enhances the educational benefits for all students. Smith notes:

...the consistent findings from numerous studies demonstrate the role of underrepresented minority faculty and White women, in particular, in bringing diversity themes to scholarship, increasing diversity in the curriculum and introducing more and different patterns of pedagogy, including increasing the engagement of students in the community.” (Smith, 2020, p. 156)

Finally, a diverse faculty/staff is important for the purposes of mentorship and role modeling. Research has found that minority students who have educators of the same race or ethnicity are more likely to look to those teachers as role models and to report greater effort in school and higher college goals (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). A study looking at community college classrooms found that performance gaps of minority students can be closed by 20% to 50% if faculty more closely resemble students (Fairlie et al., 2014). As the USAF seeks to improve the diversity in rated career fields, as well as within Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) disciplines, having diverse faculty/staff role models in these disciplines is critical to these efforts.

### **Line of Effort #2: Equitably retain and provide opportunities for success for students, faculty and staff across identities (race, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+, religion, etc.).**

One might ask why it is important to equitably retain and provide opportunities for success across identities? Equity in retention and success across identities is important because disparities may help identify unintended barriers, lack of equity drives down performance, and exploring disparities often leads to innovation. Exploring disparities across identity groups might help identify unintended barriers to success and retention, which in turn may be impacting all identity

groups. When I worked DEI at the USAF headquarters, we were studying officer retention rates. Since high attrition rates are very costly for an organization (e.g., talent drain, high replacement training costs, etc.), we wanted to better understand how we might retain our best and brightest. When we examined the retention data for all officers, there were no concerning trends. When we examined retention data for men and women separately, we discovered an alarming finding, namely that female officers were departing the USAF at twice the rate of male officers between four to seven years of service, and which is a significant talent drain for the institution. While this trend is similar within the larger U.S. workforce, the rate of women's attrition from the USAF was significantly higher than the national average. Follow-up surveys were conducted to better understand the different reasons why male and female officers depart the USAF, and led to new policies that significantly improved the quality of life for women as well as greatly benefited men. The USAF recently embarked on a number of disparity reviews across identities, which has indeed uncovered some pronounced differences in success/failure indicators (DoD, 2020). The next step will be to accomplish a root cause analysis to get at the "why" of these disparities, which will undoubtedly lead to systemic improvements for all Airmen (e.g., removing barriers, improving processes, addressing potential bias, etc.).

Real or perceived inequity in an organization drives down team performance. Research demonstrates that employees' perception of fairness and equitable treatment is an important factor in retention, performance, and engagement. In fact, just the perception that treatment is unfair can have demoralizing effects on the organization because

it: "... Creates a climate of distrust and hostility; Erodes performance and employee commitment to the organization; Increases counter-productive work behavior; Reduces the willingness of employees to help each other; and increases voluntary turnover and absenteeism" (Ceplenski, 2013). As stated in the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) Action Orders, USAF leaders need to "ensure the way we place our Airmen in specific jobs offering opportunities for advancement fosters a diverse and inclusive culture promoting dignity and fairness" (Brown, 2020, p. 2).

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Exploring disparities in retention and success across identities often leads to important organizational innovations. It is important to thoughtfully consider how an organization explains the apparent gaps in retention and success for different identity groups, because these explanations will either drive innovations to close the gaps or lead to inaction. For instance, if a gap in student success for one identity is simply attributed to lack of preparation (e.g., test scores used as indicators of academic qualifications) then the solution might simply be to focus on recruiting students within an identity group who demonstrate preparedness. While preparation might be one factor explaining a success gap, only considering this explanation relieves

the organization of any responsibility to innovate in an attempt to close the gap. Alternatively, considering the unique challenges students face within certain identity groups, and seeking to reduce those challenges, might lead to innovation. For instance, stereotype threat is a “socially premised psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Numerous studies indicate that when a stereotype is evoked in a classroom setting, groups that are susceptible to that stereotype underperform (Smith, 2020). Other studies have demonstrated that underperformance can be eliminated when the stereotype threat was removed (Smith, 2020). If an organizational achievement gap is explained, at least in part by stereotype threat, then the organization can take concrete steps to mitigate that threat, thereby enhancing performance. As another example, much of the research on institutions that are successful with first-generation and low-income students underscores the importance of making clear the paths to success (Smith, 2020). As higher-income, or multigenerational, college students have greater access to resources and experiences, they likely receive more advice and knowledge about paths to academic success. The achievement gap is not framed in respect to the ability of the students, but is framed simply by a lack of awareness. By providing more explicit, clear mentorship on paths to success, institutions are potentially able to close achievement gaps for first-generation and low-income students. Notice, in the two examples above, no expectations or standards for student performance were lowered. Instead, challenges and barriers were identified and mitigated by innovation, which led to enhanced performance. In fact, research indicates that “high expectations,” coupled with “belief and support, are three staples of an approach to learning” (Smith, 2020, p. 242).

### **Line of Effort #3: Develop all students, faculty and Airmen across the base to have the knowledge and skills to value diversity & lead inclusively at USAFA and in the USAF.**

Having established the importance of diversity to USAFA recruiting and retention/success, we turn to development. One might ask, “Why is it important to develop our students/faculty/staff to value diversity and lead inclusively?” For our students as future USAF leaders, this critical knowledge and skill set is essential because inclusivity and diversity are military necessities, are crucial components of the USAFA Leader of Character Framework<sup>1</sup>, and they enhance team/organizational performance. According to the USAF Strategic Diversity Roadmap:

“Diversity is a military necessity. Air Force decision-making and operational capabilities are enhanced by diversity among its Airmen, uniformed and civilian, helping make the Air Force more agile, innovative and effective. It opens the door to creative solutions to complex problems and provides our Air Force a competitive edge in air, space and cyberspace” (2013, p. 4).

Therefore, the USAF Academy must actively seek to develop leaders with the skills to leverage diverse teams, in order to enhance decision-making and operational capabilities. Similarly, the roadmap makes the case that “diversity is critical for successful operations in the international community. With a force interacting with people around the globe, cross-culturally competent Airmen (and those proficient in foreign languages) are critical to building partnerships and conducting the full range of military operations” (2013, p. 4). This

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Leader of Character Framework, please reference <https://jcli.scholasticahq.com/article/13606-developing-leaders-of-character>



highlights a final educational need, to develop leaders who are cross-culturally competent, which is critical to building international partnerships and conducting operations across the globe.

Second, it is essential for our students to value diversity, and lead inclusively, because these skills are vital elements of our Leader of Character Framework. The framework defines a “leader of character” as someone who: “Lives honorably by consistently practicing the virtues embodied in the Core Values; Lifts others to their best possible selves; and, Elevates performance toward a common and noble purpose” (USAF 2021). According to the model, to “live honorably” as a leader involves practicing many virtues, including honesty, courage, humility, etc. Two of these virtues include “Respect for Human Dignity” and “Fairness.” From a diversity perspective, it is impossible to “Respect Human Dignity” as a leader if you fail to value a follower’s identity (e.g. cultural, religious, racial, etc.). Because these identities are often central to a follower’s experience, self-esteem, or sense of worth, etc., failing to value these identities puts a leader at risk of not “Respecting Human Dignity,” and consequently, driving down performance. As noted previously, our nation’s talent is becoming increasingly diverse across race, ethnicity, gender, etc.. These diverse, talented young adults are the very Airmen our cadets will someday lead. Are our future leaders ready? Are they able to identify and value the diversity of their future Airmen, who are increasingly diverse? From an inclusion perspective, it is difficult for a leader to live out the virtue of being “Fair,” if the leader does not actively and intentionally create an inclusive environment (e.g., listening to underrepresented voices; understanding how their own potential biases around

identity shape their behavior; encouraging alternative viewpoints, etc.). Do our future leaders have the skills to lead inclusively? The next component of the Leader of Character Framework includes the ability to “Lift others to their best possible selves.” How does a leader “lift others” if they don’t have a deep understanding of their follower’s uniqueness, identities, history, experiences, etc.? Similarly, a part of helping followers be their “best possible selves,” is to help followers “bring their whole selves to work” and not feel as if they must hide parts of their identity for fear of being an outsider. Diversity and inclusive leadership result in a sense of

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belonging, which is essential to lifting “others to their best possible selves.” As stated in our CSAF Action Orders, USAF leaders need to “Permeate diversity, inclusion, and belonging actions with this AO (Action Order) to cultivate and sustain both a USAF culture and environment of excellence in which all Airmen and families can reach their full potential” (Brown, 2020, p. 6). The final component of the Leader of Character Framework involves elevating “performance toward a common and noble purpose.” As we will demonstrate in the next section, diversity and inclusive leadership elevate team/organizational performance.

Finally, it is essential for our students to learn these skills, because diversity and inclusive leadership have been shown to enhance team/organizational

performance. A recent McKinsey report on 366 companies found that those companies in the upper quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above the industry mean, and those in the upper quartile for racial and ethnic diversity in management were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry mean (Hunt et al., 2015). One might ask, “Why do diverse teams/organizations outperform others?” In *Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter*, the authors review the research and suggest diverse teams outperform others because they tend to focus more on the facts, process these facts more carefully, and are simply more innovative (Rock & Grant, 2016). While diversity is often a prerequisite for enhanced performance, diversity alone is often insufficient for improving performance. What is required instead is an inclusive leadership approach that promotes greater inclusion of employees. In a study conducted among public managers in Texas, results showed that improving organizational performance required leadership dedicated to fostering inclusion (Sabharwal, 2014). To further illustrate the importance of inclusive leadership in leveraging the potential power of diversity, a research team conducted a meta-analysis of 108 empirical studies on processes and performance in 10,632 teams (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021). They found that cultural diversity leads to process losses through task conflict and decreased social integration, but to process gains through increased creativity and satisfaction. In other words, diverse teams, if not lead inclusively, can experience decreased performance because of task conflict and low social integration. Alternatively, if a diverse team is led inclusively, the team will experience increased creativity and satisfaction. Therefore, diversity is important, but not sufficient, for enhanced team performance, it often comes down to good, inclusive leadership.

In conclusion, DEI is absolutely vital to USAFA’s mission of developing leaders of character. Competing for talent, enhancing team/organizational performance, and preparing future officers to lead diverse Airmen, a focus on DEI improves USAFA’s ability to develop future leaders for the USAF and USSF.

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