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Cadets' Perceptions of Leadership Development Activities

at the United States Air Force Academy [1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify cadet perceptions of the effectiveness of a wide spectrum of leadership development activities at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). Sixty cadet leaders in three categories (athletic, military, and extracurricular) were questioned using a computerized survey. The computer program gathered background information, performance data, and ratings of mandatory and optional programs. The overall USAFA experience is rated high in terms of its impact on leadership development, but there is room for improvement in many programs.

Leadership development is the main goal of the USAF Academy, as stated in our mission statement of graduating officers "with the knowledge, character and motivation essential to leadership." Yet some have suggested the Academy is not fulfilling this mission. General T.R. Milton, USAF, (1989) warns, "There is something wrong" (103). He feels the Academy is producing officers who lack the commitment to be leaders and career officers in the military. This recent scrutiny echoes the arguments of several years prior that careerism, occupationalism, and centralization had produced a state where "something vital is missing in Air Force leadership" (Benton, 1981).

Recently, the curriculum at the US Military Academy (West Point) has been criticized for not properly preparing future leaders (Zais, 1990). In response to these and other criticisms, West Point has implemented a new cadet leader development system (Palmer, 1990).

Bass' (1990) review of the literature on leadership education, training, and development points out several lessons which provide guidance for designing and evaluating leadership development programs. His general findings are that activities should be designed with both organizational requirements and individual knowledge, skill, and attitude needs in mind. Many studies have found that experiential or on-the-job training is favored over classroom activities. Bass (1990) also cites many studies that found leadership development activities should be action-oriented rather than theory-oriented, and the need for congruence between training environment and the environment for which the trainee is being prepared.

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[1] This research was completed as an independent study project in 1991 when Lieutenant West was a senior at the USAF Academy, under the advisement of LtCol Dilla. The ideas presented in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the USAF Academy, the US Air Force, or the Dept of Defense.
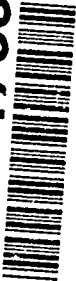
In a study of junior Air Force aircraft maintenance officers (AMO's), Morabito and Dilla (1985) found the most important leadership development activities, as rated by the AMO's, were work-related experiences. Formal education, such as Professional Military Education (PME), were seen as much less important. They found perceptions of greater leadership development to be associated with experience as indicated by higher rank and prior military service. Their research also supports Bass' (1990) conclusions in that they found experience should be specifically related to the organizational environment in order to be perceived as most effective (Morabito & Dilla, 1985).

What is the state of affairs at the USAF Academy? How effective is current leadership development perceived to be, both in an overall sense and with respect to specific programs? What activities do cadets view as most supportive of the goal of leadership development? To provide preliminary answers to these questions and to provide direction for future research, this study examined the perceptions of cadet leaders regarding the impact of a variety of USAFA programs on their leadership development.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 60 first class (senior) cadets at USAFA. Three groups of 20 subjects were randomly selected from the available pool of cadet leaders in three categories: (1) military--group and sqaudron commanders; (2) athletic--team captains; and (3) extracurricular--Cadets-in-Charge (CIC's) of USAFA clubs.

Apparatus

This research used a survey administered via computer disk on cadets' personal computers. This emerging technology was key to the success of the study and the accuracy of the results as we found cadets to be fascinated by the format of the survey. Audio and visual effects captured cadets' interest and yielded many positive comments--not the typical reaction to surveys at USAFA.

Use of the computer disk helped ensure data quality by not accepting invalid data and by eliminating the need to transcribe data; this also made the analysis phase faster and easier.

Procedure

Computer disks containing the survey program were sent to each subject through the cadet distribution system. Each disk was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and how to start the program.

In the program itself, the subject was welcomed and again told the purpose of the research. Definitions of leadership and leadership development were presented for a common frame of reference. Then subject background information was gathered, including gender, academic major, grade point average (GPA), and military performance average (MPA).

The program pre-designated 21 broadly defined "leadership development" programs which are mandatory for all cadets, including such things as the core curriculum, fourth class system, weekend training events, and the cadet honor code. Cadets were asked to designate any of 39 other leadership development

programs in which they participated voluntarily, such as flying programs instructor, special summer programs, or other leadership roles not required of all cadets.

Next, cadets were presented with each of the programs in which they had participated, in random order, and asked to rate them for the impact on their leadership development using a seven-point scale from "Very Negative" to "Very Positive" with four indicating "Neutral." Finally, they were asked to rate the impact of their overall USAFA leadership development experience on the same seven-point scale.

Results

Data from the computer disks was aggregated and analyzed using the SPSS/PC+ statistical package for IBM PC's. With regard to background information, subjects' ages ranged from 20-25 years old. There were 18.3% females in the sample compared to about 12% females in the cadet wing. The average GPA for these cadet leaders was 3.18 (on a four-point scale) and MPA was 3.35. Thus, the "average" cadet in this sample was on the Dean's, Commandant's, and Superintendent's lists for outstanding performance-- a measure of success from the institution's perspective.

These cadet leaders were spread out among 22 different academic majors with the three most common being Behavioral Science--Human Factors (13), History (8), and Political Science (5).

Table 1 summarizes the ratings of programs for their impact on cadets' leadership development. Only those programs rated by at least one-third of the sample (20 cadets) were included. This cut-off ensures a reasonably stable average while recognizing there were three distinct groups, probably with differing experiences, who rated the programs. The programs are rank-ordered in Table 1 according to mean ratings, from most positive to most negative impact. Also included is the standard deviation of their ratings and the number of cadet leaders who rated each program. The rating of the overall USAFA leadership development experience is also included in Table 1.

Results show the overall USAFA leadership development experience is rated positively (mean of 5.9 on a seven-point scale). The activities which earned the highest ratings were the current leadership roles of these cadets-- Club CIC, Team Captain of a Sport, and Squadron Supervisor. (Group and Wing Staffs had equally high average ratings but were rated by insufficient numbers of cadets to be included in this tabulation.) Summer training program leadership positions (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape [SERE] and First and Second Basic Cadet Training [BCT] cadre) also received some of the highest marks. Intercollegiate athletics, club activities, and church/religious activities also received high marks (equal to or above the overall USAFA rating).

Only one formal leadership education program received an average rating higher than the overall USAFA experience--the Commanders' Leadership Enrichment Seminar (CLES). This is a two-day workshop program for military leaders (wing, group, and squadron commanders).

The lowest rated programs included the cadet MPA system (which assigns military ratings to cadets twice a year), the Leader Attributes Survey (a cadet rating and feedback program), the cadet disciplinary system, morning and noon meal marching formations, and academic core courses as a group. Besides being the lowest rated items in a relative sense, the average ratings for these programs were at or below the "neutral" point on the rating scale.

Table 1
Ratings of Cadet Leadership Development Activities

Program	Mean	Std Dev	# of Raters
Cadet-in-Charge of Any Club	6.68	0.568	22
Team Captain of an Intercollegiate Sport	6.64	0.790	22
SERE Cadre	6.36	1.026	28
Squadron Supervisor (Sq Cmdr, Element Ldr)	6.27	0.992	52
Second BCT Cadre	6.24	0.689	29
Intercollegiate Athletic Participation	6.22	0.929	36
First BCT Cadre	6.22	0.892	27
Commanders Leadership Enrichment Seminar	6.17	0.834	23
Church/Religious Activities and Clubs	5.94	1.029	33
Overall USAFA Experience	5.90	0.817	60
Extracurricular Clubs	5.79	1.382	24
Fourth Class System	5.67	1.374	60
Training of the Fourthclassmen	5.63	1.390	60
Basic Cadet Training	5.58	1.266	60
Squadron Staff	5.57	1.118	49
SERE as a Student	5.57	1.226	60
Beh Sci 310 (Academic Crse on Leadership)	5.47	1.120	49
Freefall Parachuting Program	5.42	1.474	26
Major's Courses	5.40	1.108	60
T-41 or Navigator Training	5.38	1.213	40
Operation Air Force	5.37	1.128	59
Coach of Any Intramural Sport	5.36	0.848	22
Intramural Sport Participation	5.13	1.209	47
Honor Code and Instruction	5.12	1.223	60
Squadron Sponsor Trips	5.05	0.964	60
Academy Training Philosophy (ATP)	4.97	1.288	60
CONUS Summer Program	4.91	0.996	54
Professional Military Studies	4.80	1.054	60
Academic Group Projects (e.g., Engr 410)	4.70	1.253	60
Intramural Sport Referee	4.65	1.531	20
Project Warrior	4.62	0.940	60
Soaring Program	4.47	1.419	51
Professional Military Trng (M-5 classes)	4.43	1.267	60
Supervisor Feedback (Forms 6 & 76)	4.42	1.253	60
Weekend Training (SAMI, Parade, IRI)	4.42	1.369	60
Cadet in Charge of Quarters (CCQ)	4.37	1.149	60
Squadron Duty Officer (SDO)	4.23	0.689	60
Academic Class Section Marcher	4.12	0.963	52
Academic Core Courses	4.07	1.148	60
Morning and Noon Meal Formations	3.90	1.285	60
Cadet Disciplinary System (Fms 10, Tours)	3.85	1.376	60
Leader Attributes Survey (Top/Bottom Four)	3.63	1.687	60
Military Perf Average Rating System	3.25	1.514	60

Based on previous research and some hypotheses about cadet behavior not discussed in this paper, responses were analyzed for differences across the three different categories of cadet leaders. Only one significant result was found. Consistent with predictions, athletic leaders were found to have participated in a smaller number of leadership development programs than cadets in the military/extracurricular categories (means of 35 versus 37 programs, respectively). The practical significance of these results will be addressed next.

Discussion

Although no statement of causality can be firmly stated based on these results, a plausible explanation for the difference in program participation is that athletic leaders simply do not have the time to participate in more development programs. A time management analysis or longitudinal study of these groups might provide more insight into this difference.

The preponderance of actual leadership role experiences among the highest rated programs is consistent with the findings of Morabito and Dilla (1985) for Air Force officers in the aircraft maintenance career field. The presence of the fourth class system, from both follower and leader perspectives, among the higher ratings speaks well for this aspect of Academy life. At the same time, however, it is curious that the Academy Training Philosophy (ATP), the guideline governing this system, is rated considerably lower (just under 5.0 for ATP compared to 5.7 for the fourth class system and 5.6 for training fourthclassmen).

Further research should explore the reasons for the results found here, using greater numbers and a wider sampling of cadets. In particular, the negative ratings of some key institutional programs need to be understood. Some of the activities grouped together here (e.g., squadron supervisor) could be broken out to investigate what may be important differences between positions (Squadron Commander vs. Flight Commander vs. Element Leader). Continued assessment of how our programs and activities contribute to the goal of leadership development, and how they could be improved, is a must.

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