IMPLEMENTING CHANGE TO COUNTER ATTRITION, 1965-1974: AN INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE

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Since it's founding in 1802, the United States Military Academy has provided our nation a core of professionally trained and broadly educated officers ready to answer the nation's call. Most recently, this concept was codified in the Military Academy's rather broad statement of purpose--"to provide the nation with leaders of character who serve the common defense."01 While the republic has matured, this basic need has endured. Indeed, in this age of rapidly advancing technology and increasingly sophisticated weaponry, this need has actually been accentuated.

Yet, while the purpose statement broadly defines the reason for its being, the Military Academy's role in fulfilling the nation's defense needs takes on clearer definition in its mission statement:

> "To educate and train the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the attributes essential to professional growth as an officer of the regular army, and to inspire each to a lifetime of service to the nation."02

Though not explicitly stated, the insinuation is to inspire each graduate to a lifetime of service to the nation as a officer in the regular army. Douglas MacArthur, one of the Academy's more illustrious graduates, perhaps best expressed the nation's expectations of West Pointers when he addressed the Corps of Cadets in 1962, saying,

> "...your mission remains fixed, determined inviolable--it is to win our wars. Everything else in your professional career is but corollary to this vital dedication. All other public purposes, all other public projects, all other public needs, great or small, will find others for their accomplishment: but you are the ones who are trained to fight: yours is the profession of

> arms--the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory; that if you lose the nation will be destroyed; that the very obsession of your service must be Duty--Honor--Country."03

It appears clear that the mission of the Military Academy is to produce an highly specialized and very focused commodity for the nation--professional Army officers. Moreover, the general expectation of the American people is that these graduates will continue on to careers of exemplary service to the nation as officers in the regular army. This expectation, that from its graduates will "come the great captains who hold the nation's destiny in their hands"04, is the lasting legacy of the Academy to the nation; and is what differentiates and distinguishes West Point from all other commissioning sources.

This paper will argue that while West Point has enjoyed considerable success in accomplishing its stated purpose of providing the nation with leaders of character who serve the common defense, as most quality institutions of higher learning do, it has had markedly less success in its primary mission to inspire each graduate to a lifetime of service to the nation. To this end, the argument will use two historical studies to focus on causal factors for the attrition of Academy graduates upon the completion of their mandatory service obligation, and argue that the Academy has failed to adequately implement those studies' recommendations to lessen this attrition.

Today, conservative estimates indicate that the American taxpayer pays $191,000 for each graduate of West Point.05 Keeping in mind the average class size is 1,000 cadets, the cumulative costs to graduate the four most recent classes has approached $800,000,000--and that was before their technical branch training even began. With such an investment in the education and preparation of each officer, it is no wonder that the attrition of Academy graduates is a subject that continues to be of utmost importance not only to the American people, but the United States Army, as well.

In the Spring of 1964, with American involvement in Vietnam escalating, a Department of the Army Staff Team arrived at the United States Military Academy to investigate the high attrition of graduates who declined to make the Army their career. The Staff Team recommended to the Chief of Staff of the Army that the Superintendent, Major General James B. Lampert, study all causes of attrition to try to "increase the desire of cadets to serve in the United States Army".06 Noting "the high percentage of cadets entering other armed services during recent years (as at that time they were able to do) as well as the resignation rates after completion of mandatory service obligation," the Superintendent appointed five officers from the Department of Military Instruction to study the problem of motivating cadets at the Academy and to determine what steps could be taken institutionally "to better orient cadets toward

careers in the Army."07 Within the granite confines of West Point, the result of their work has come to be known as the Motivation Study 1965.

Although not the first study of attrition done at the Military Academy, the Motivation Study 1965 focused on identifying institutional changes needed to reverse the rising trend of graduates choosing not to pursue a military career beyond their initial commitment. In this regard, the Study Group concentrated on the West Point environment and the Thayer system, wherein a cadet was graded every day in each subject, to determine what, if anything, could be done to increase cadet motivation towards a military career.

The Study Group initially identified, from a survey of the the graduating class, what they concluded were the main reasons why individuals entered the Academy-- prestige, military career, education benefits, and parental influence.08 Furthermore, the study examined the practical desires and aspirations that emerged over the four year span as a cadet, and determined that cadet attitudes reflected a change from respect for selfless service to a much more materialistic interest in the Army. Specifically, the study found,

> "Retirement, fringe benefits, pay, assignments, education--all loom large in a cadet's mind. Since these material benefits are more than matched by civilian professions, an Army career is not as attractive in these respects as it once was--and there is no indication that this situation will change in the foreseeable future."09

The study concluded that this increased interest in material benefits was simply a reflection of American society's changing attitude.

Suffice it to say, there are many such uncontrollable factors that affect attrition. However, the Academy administration can take positive measures to reduce attrition among its graduates. The "Motivation Study 1965" produced thirty-three recommendations, seventeen of which the Academy adopted and implemented. Many of these recommendations supported renewed emphasis on cadet professional development. This paper will focus on two specific areas of cadet development which the Study Group found to be deficient--the state of cadet-officer relations and providing career information about the Army to cadets.

Several of the Study Group's findings still impact on Academy life today and remain challenging issues for every administration to improve upon in order to decrease attrition at West Point. The major implications of this study was the relationship between officers and cadets, and the lack of cadet knowledge about the Army, both issues we continue to wrestle with today. The group's findings and recommendations were significant in changing the entire focus of the Academy to the professional development of the cadet.

After conducting a survey of the Class of 1965, the Study Group concluded significant improvements could be made in the West Point environment. Specifically, improvements

were needed in the area of cadet-officer relationships, where fully 95% of the class of '65 stated that they desired more informal contact with officers. This desire was further amplified when almost half of the first class men stated they did not feel free enough to approach most officers for advice and information on an Army career.010 This last statistic, taken in conjunction with the fact that some 62% of the class desired more personal and pertinent career information, tells the chilling tale of an aloof officer Corps and an unyeilding and structured regimentation that must have typified the West Point environment of the early to mid-1960's.011

Based upon the study's recommendations, several measures were taken to improve relationships between officers and cadets. The major thrust of these initiatives was to provide the cadets exposure to exemplary and identifiable role models. In line with this, the Department of Military Psychology and Leadership developed a program to invite recent graduates back to talk to cadet companies. Returning graduates were selected based on their performance in the Army, and the sessions were conducted as an open forum where a free flow of ideas and information were encouraged. The program accomplished two things. First, it gave cadets the opportunity to interact with officers who, because of their recent graduation, could easily be recognized as a role model; and second, cadets could acquire firsthand knowledge of not only what could be expected

during the uncertain and anxious years at the beginning of an Army career, but Vietnam as well.012 This program was aimed at improving cadet-officer relations by bridging the perceived gap between the cadets and the "old grads" of the staff with recent graduates. This particular initiative has survived through the years since 1965, and exists even today, as part of the Academy's preparation of its graduates. However, the effectiveness of this initiative in enhancing cadet-officer relationships must be questioned. A review of the first class questionnaire from 1974 revealed that, nine years later, some 54% of the graduating class still thought cadet-officer relationships at the Academy were poor.013 Once again, the 1974 survey found that some 40% of the cadets questioned still found it difficult to approach officers regarding career options.014 However, what is perhaps most indicative of the failure of this initiative is the fact that 49.58% of the class felt that their officers had played, at best, a minor role in motivating them towards a career in the Army.015 Unfortunately, this trend cannot be directly related to the classes of the present era due to the vast changes in the questions on the first class survey over the years. However, there remains to be a disconnect even nine years later, when less than half of the Class of 1974 indicate that contact with military personnel influenced their expectations of the Army.016

A more successful recommendation was the action by the Superintendent to encourage tactical officers to invite cadets to their homes for social occasions.017 This custom that is still officially supported today under the auspices of the Fourth Class Military Mentor Program.018 Such informal contact gave the cadet the opportunity to interact with officers and formulate a better understanding of Army social practices and to see how an officer lived in the Army. In addition, it offered some insight on what Army life was like. The Academy's administration understood the risks involved here since officers might very well share their bad experiences as well as their good ones. Nevertheless, the cadet would have a much more comprehensive picture of life in the Army.

Another action taken to enhance the ability of officers to serve as role models was a paper on officer-cadet relationships. The Department of Military Psychology and Leadership recommended the Academy have a written policy, provided to all officers, reflecting the Superintendent's and Commandant's concept of the proper officer-cadet relationship. This differentiation was necessary because officers were not familiar with dealing with cadets after spending considerable time with soldiers, and needed assistance making that transition. Specifically, the Superintendent addressed a letter to all officers at West Point which provided guidance concerning proper relationships with cadets. The Superintendent specified

that there were times when officers would find it appropriate "to treat cadets in a more personal and less formal manner" and they were encouraged to increase this informal contact to: (1) improve officer-cadet relationships at the Academy, (2) broaden the cadet's knowledge of the military profession, and; (3) make the cadet feel a part of the proud profession of arms.019 However, when asked how satisfied they were with the respect given cadets by officers, almost half of the Class of 1974, some they 49.4%, replied that they were somewhat or very dissatisfied.020 Again, such a broad negative consensus among the Class of 1974 clearly indicates that the initiatives of 1965 were either outright failures or that their effectiveness was very short lived.

The second major point, to provide the needed information about the Army, as opposed to "role modeling", also received several recommended actions. The Study accepted the premise that West Point, as an institution, was a separate entity from the Army. Futhermore, the Study recognized this belief had negative effects on the motivation of cadets. The problem was that cadets lacked adequate knowledge about the Army and, therefore, based their beliefs on rumors and stories. The majority of contact cadets had with Army units and personnel occurred during summer training, the academic year providing limited opportunity for contact, if any. Therefore, it fell to the officers stationed at West Point to insure that cadets had

correct and sufficient information about the Army, especially as seniors approached branch selection in their final year.

The Department of Military Instruction was tasked to initiate discussion time in Tactics classes where cadets would have the opportunity to broaden their knowledge of the Army. The officers teaching military instruction were actually "authorized and encouraged to take 10 minutes in each period to discuss any items of general interest to an Army career."021 This increased the cadets'exposure to what they could expect once they entered the Army, and would provide an informal forum where they could consistently gather and assimilate information for making branch selections in the first class year. Because so many cadets had such limited exposure to any aspect of the Army, it was felt by the administration that increased contact with officers would result in increased knowledge of the Army and that, in turn, would provide the necessary information for many to chose to pursue a career in the Army. Although in theory it appeared sound, in fact, almost one quarter of the Class of 1974 indicated that the officers did not motivate them to pursue an Army career.022

To encourage cadets to gather knowledge about the Army, the Study recommeded the Academy insure current Army publications, professional journals and motion pictures of professional interest were made available to cadets to satisfy their need for information.023

Although there are several environmental factors that can influence a cadet's desire to pursue a military career, actions on the part of the Academy cannot be ignored. There is no experimental group controlled to determine remains whether there is a casual relationship between new initiatives of the Academy and the reduction, or at least maintenance, of attrition rates. Nevertheless, the Academy must and does continue to develop programs that professionally develop cadets.

One would expect, and rightfully so, that after almost two centuries of training future officers, we would now have the process refined to almost an art. Yet, such is far from the case. Several of the problems identified, and addressed, by the Study Group in 1965 resurfaced time and again in the first class surveys conducted through at least 1974. Perhaps more pertinent is the fact that two of the deficiencies which the Study Group recognized and addressed in 1965, were again identified as areas of concern in a tangential study, conducted by CPT Louis Czoka in 1974, on attrition within the Corps of Cadets. In the 1974 study, COL Czoka focused primarily on motivational losses within the Corps and attempted to establish an admission criterion wherby one could predict an applicant's motivation or commitment to a military career. As a product of his research, CPT Csoka determined that there was no valid and reliable relationship that could be drawn between the existing admission criterion and motivation. However, his

research did corroborate the the findings of the 1965 Study Group and the trends identified in the first class surveys, namely that commitment to a military career decreases significantly and appreciably thru a cadet's career.024

In doing so, he recommended the Academy incorporate a program that would "increase commitment to a military career as a cadet advances to graduation."025 He recommended that the Academy take certain considerations into account to address this issue. Two of his four concerns reflect the exact issues implicated in the Motivation Study 1965: the jobs of an Army officer and how cadets perceive them; and, cadet attitudes about officers at West Point as models.

Developing leaders, and all that entails, is timeless. Though technology has impacted significantly on the evolution of tactics and doctrine, the essence of leadership, good leadership, is today the same as 187 years ago. Our problem then must be to identify what should be done... and do it consistently. The Motivation Study 1965 changed the focus of the Academy to the leader-development in the Corps. It's findings were, and remain, significant to the accomplishment of the Academy's mission. All the Academy has to do is act on the recommendations.

ENDNOTES

[1] "2002: A Road Map to our Third Century," SASP, Mar 88, purpose, USMA, West Point, NY.

[2] Ibid., mission.

[3] Speech delivered by Douglas MacArthur upon acceptance of the Thayer Award, 12 MAy 1962.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Price/Cost/Worth of West Point," by COL Larry R. Donnithorne, SASP, Assembly, Oct 88, pp. 6-7.

[6] "Motivational Study," Department of Military Instruction, USMA, 1965, p. 1.

[7] Ibid., p. 1.

[8] Ibid., p. 7.

[9] Ibid., p. 5.

[10] Ibid., p. 40.

[11] Ibid., p. p 41

[12] Ibid., Incl. 8.

[13] "First Class Questionnaire, Class of 1974," Office of Institutional Research, Aug 74, p.35.

[14] Ibid., p. 15.

[15] Ibid., p. 16.

[16] Ibid., p. 31.

[17] "Motivational Study," Incl. 9.

[18] According to USCC, S-3, for academic year 1989-1990, 1259 fourth class cadets are sponsored by 516 officers.

[19] "Motivational Study," Incl. 24.

[20] "First Class Questionnaire, Class of 1974," p. 20.

[21] "Motivational Study," Incl 4.

[22] "First Class Questionnaire, Class of 1974," p. 16.

[23] "Motivational Study," p. 24.

[24] "Motivational Aspects of Selection and Attrition at West Point," by Louis S.Csoka, Office of Military Leadership, 1974.

[25] "Motivational Aspects of Selection and Attrition at West Point," p. 4.

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