

Is there a need for a Fourth Pillar?

**Moral-Ethical Development at West Point:
An Essential Task that Requires Equal Billing**

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One can argue that today's society lives by a different set of morals and ethics than did its predecessors. Standards change daily regarding what society will allow and what it deems intolerable. We in the military take it upon ourselves to imbue in our soldiers those ethics upon which our profession is grounded. These professional ethics are witnessed in the conduct of every officer in the Army. The formal definition of ethics reads:

Ethics - 1. A system of moral principles 2. The rules of conduct recognized in group, culture, etc. 3. Moral principles, as of an individual 4. The branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to rightness and wrongness of certain actions and the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.¹

The United States Military Academy has advanced this cause for nearly 200 years by focusing on a cadet's moral and ethical development.

West Point has the task of developing cadets into leaders of character. This development process centers around three key programs: academic instruction, military training and physical fitness. Additionally, the Academy invests tremendous time and energy in developing leaders of character. The West Point strategic vision states that "the quality that the American people most value in their leaders is character."² Leaders of character possess excellent morals and ethics. With that in mind the Academy integrates the moral-ethical development program into academic instruction, military training and physical development. The Superintendent charges each faculty and staff member to conduct themselves in a morally and ethically correct manner in their interactions with the cadets.³ The United States Corps of Cadets (USCC) Standard Operating Procedures

¹ Urdang, Laurence, The Random House College Dictionary, Revised Edition, 1984, 453.

² *West Point 2002 and Beyond*.

³ *Ibid*.

(SOP) addresses the Academy's bedrock values of Integrity and Respect. Integrity finds its strength in the Honor System and, along with Respect, guides the cadet's interactions with others and with their environment.⁴ Together these elements are the basis of the cadets moral growth. However, after reorganizing its curriculum in 1896, the Academy has struggled to proactively provide the cadets with a sound moral-ethical development program. Specifically between 1946 and 1976, by disregarding repeated recommendations to add formal ethics instruction, revisions of the academic curriculum failed to enhance the cadets' character development resulting in the Academy reacting to several incidents during those years.

The Academy possessed a formal program of ethics instruction and an informal cadet system to handle ethical issues in its early years. From 1818 to 1896 the Department of Geography, History and Ethics taught, at varying intervals, a formal course in "Practical Ethics."⁵ The garrison chaplain had sole responsibility for the department, which also periodically taught courses in English grammar and literature, Constitutional and international law, rhetoric, geography and history.⁶ Throughout the period the academic board continually reorganized the curriculum to reflect Army and societal requirements. The Board of Visitors repeatedly made recommendations to increase the amount of English language instruction.⁷ This recommendation, along with the expansion

⁴ United States Military Academy, United States Corps of Cadets, Standard Operating Procedures for USCC, 1 August 1997, A-1-2.

⁵ LTC J. A. McChristian, USCC S3 to The Commandant of Cadets, 3 September 1952, USMA Archives, 1.

⁶ Morrison, "The Best School in the World," USMA Archives, 92.

⁷ Report of the Board of Visitors, 1892, Washington, Government Printing Office, USMA Archives, 11; and Report of the Board of Visitors, 1894, Washington, Government Printing Office USMA Archives, 9.

of physical education instruction and other various curriculum modifications,⁸ led the Academic Board to pursue what they believed to be the only proper course of action. In 1896, the Board transferred all the courses, except "Practical Ethics," to other departments. The ethics course at West Point was removed on February 18th of that year because of the Board's belief that,

The influence, both social and official, under which the training of the cadets is carried on are such as to minimize the necessity of formal instruction in this subject from textbooks and the moral condition of the cadets as evidenced by the number of communicants and by the religious activity which now prevails would seem to indicate that this matter may safely be left in the future, as in the past, to the ministrations of the Chaplain and to the continual operation of the causes which have produced such fortunate and satisfactory results.⁹

Formal academic instruction of pure ethics has not occurred at the Academy since that time.

During those early years the responsibility for the cadet's moral-ethical development fell, not only on the academic department, but also on the Corps itself. From the earliest days cadets enforced their own code of conduct. Although unwritten and loosely bound by the parameters of "gentlemanly conduct," this code endured from class to class. The chaplain, through the course in ethics, and the Commandant of Cadets retained responsibility for instilling these values in each cadet. With the Corps rested the enforcement of those values and, if they were violated, the punishment. Associating lying and stealing with the code occurred as the years progressed. Around the time the

⁸ LTC C. E. Covell, Chairman of the Superintendent's Curriculum Study, 31 July 1958, USMA Archives, 54.

⁹ Records of the Academic Board, June 17, 1896, Vol 15, 322, Tab A, cited from LTC J. A. McChristian, USCC S3 to the Commandant of Cadets, 3 September 1952, USMA Archives.

Academic Board removed ethics instruction from the curriculum, a formal committee, although not recognized by the Academy, evolved within the Corps. Self-charged with the duties of investigating and reporting suspected honor violations, this Vigilance Committee, as it became known, remained active for over 25 years.¹⁰

The ensuing fifty years at West Point saw gradual revisions occur in reaction to the changing world. In 1902, Superintendent Albert L. Mills challenged the Academic Board to broaden the cadets' experiences with a more liberal arts based education but met staunch resistance and failed.¹¹ When Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur arrived as Superintendent in 1919, he succeeded in initiating the development of a broader based education in the liberal arts and sciences.¹² The Academic Board based the changes on technological advances and lessons learned from World War I.¹³

However, it is important to note that during this period with whom rested the responsibility for cadet character development is very unclear. In the Superintendent's Annual Report of 1902 one finds a vague reference to the Department of Tactics as having "the greatest influence in implanting in cadets the qualities of officers."¹⁴ The 1908-1909 Bugle Notes states that what makes a West Pointer unique is his character.¹⁵ It continues by addressing the honor of the Corps and points out that honor "is in the hands of the Corps itself."¹⁶ Brigadier General MacArthur bolstered this notion in three ways. First, in

¹⁰ Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point, New York, 1990, USMA Archives, 247-252.

¹¹ Ibid., 207-210.

¹² LTC C. E. Covell, Chairman of the Superintendent's Curriculum Study, 31 July 1958, USMA Archives, 90.

¹³ Ibid., 107.

¹⁴ Annual Report of the Superintendent 1902, Washington, Government Printing Office, USMA Archives, 11.

¹⁵ Bugle Notes, 1908-1909, West Point, NY, USMA Archives, 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

the Superintendent's Annual Report of 1920 he emphasized the importance of character development, stating that "character is the most precious component" of the West Point product.¹⁷ Second, he initiated his concept of character development which increased the amount of personal and official responsibility each cadet possessed.¹⁸ Third, MacArthur formally recognized the Vigilance Committee, declaring them an Honor Committee.¹⁹ This committee worked closely with the administration, quickly developing the Honor System's Guiding Principles and Specific Applications in time for the incoming plebe class.²⁰ Placing the responsibility for moral-ethical development in the hands of the Corps through the Honor Committee is not necessarily a faulty construct, but it raises the question: Are young cadets mature enough to truly understand the meaning of ethics and the purpose of ethical conduct?

The tremendous success of Academy graduates in World War II seems to have answered that question. The majority of the nation's newest heroes were West Pointers. However, less than a year after winning peace in the Pacific, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, expressed his concern about upholding the sanctity of the Honor System. In a letter to then Superintendent Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, he explained that the Honor System was the one thing that made the Academy different from other institutions. It worked because the staff and faculty did not take advantage of it and young cadets learned to revere it early in their careers.²¹ Two primary

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Superintendent 1920, USMA Archives, 6.

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point, New York, 1990 USMA Archives, 250.

²⁰ Bugle Notes, 1923, West Point, New York, USMA Archives, 49-54.

²¹ GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chief of Staff to MG Maxwell D. Taylor, Superintendent United States Military Academy, 2 January 1946, USMA Archives.

reasons formed the basis of his concern. First, he realized that the Academy's expansion in World War II placed increasing demands on the staff and faculty. Second, General Eisenhower perceived that the quality of the staff and faculty was lower because of the turnover rate caused by the War. He continued by making it very clear how important the cadet's character development was and that the Honor System was the mechanism to accomplish that task. He reinforced the status quo by writing, "it seems to me equally important that individuals now at the Academy, both officers and Cadets, clearly and definitely understand that the honor system is something that is in the hands of the Cadets themselves, that it is the most treasured possession of the Point..."²² He continued by emphasizing the importance of "maintaining a profound respect for the honor system... [which] falls upon the shoulders of all officers on duty there as well as upon upper classmen (sic)."²³ Unfortunately, that system failed in the not so distant future.

The ink in General Eisenhower's letter barely had time to dry before scandal rocked the foundation of the Academy. In 1951, West Point experienced a major cheating incident involving ninety cadets and football players. In August of that year the Bartlett Board, as directed by the Superintendent, began its investigation of the incident.²⁴ The Board concluded that an intense desire to play football and an arduous academic curriculum contributed to the development of a conspiracy.²⁵ In short, the football team assumed the entire blame for the disgrace to the Academy.

Later that year the Board of Visitors reviewed the problem and came to a different

²² Ibid., 1.

²³ Ibid., 2.

²⁴ 351.1 Honor Violations, Bartlett Board, USMA Archives, Series 161, 1951-1952, 1.

²⁵ Ibid., 17-21.

conclusion. In its April 1952 report the Board suggested that the recent honor violations resulted from a lack of formal ethics instruction. Although it realized that an ethics course did exist at the Academy prior to the turn of the century, it could not understand why it was removed.²⁶ Furthermore, the Board recommended adding to the curriculum a course in logic instruction in addition to a sixty-hour course in ethics.²⁷ After a fifty-five year sabbatical, the topic of ethics instruction was, once again, opened for discussion.

The Department of Tactics responded first to the Board of Visitors Report in September 1952. Though realizing that several recent events had spurred a renewed interest in ethical standards, the Department effectively avoided agreeing with the concept of formal ethics instruction. It did, however, concur with the Board regarding the continued teaching, by its own people, of practical ethics applications. The department felt that the Academic Department should teach theoretical ethics and further recommended the convening of an additional committee to develop recommendations for the Superintendent regarding this matter.²⁸

Two months later the Curriculum Committee provided their response to the Board of Visitors Report. From their interpretation of the Board's recommendations, the committee concluded that it wanted a course in moral conduct applied to a career in the military.²⁹ With that in mind, the committee reviewed the current aspects of a cadet's life at the Academy. With mandatory attendance required at chapel, the Honor System, the

²⁶ Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy, 24 April 1952, USMA Archives, 5.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

²⁸ LTC J. A. McChristian, USCC S3 to The Commandant of Cadets, 3 September 1952, USMA Archives, 2.

²⁹ The Curriculum Committee, USMA to The Academic Board, USMA, 1 November 1952, USMA Archives, 3.

emphasis of morality, duty, loyalty and patriotism in all areas of teaching, and the example set by the officers assigned to West Point, the committee saw no viable need to include formal ethics instruction in the curriculum.³⁰ It concluded by recommending that no changes occur to the curriculum as a result of the 1952 Board of Visitors Report.³¹

Eighteen months later another Board of Officers appointed to describe and evaluate the current United States Military Academy curriculum reported on formal ethics instruction. Appointed by the Superintendent, its members included Colonel James W. Green, Jr., Professor of Electricity, Chairman; Colonel Walter J. Renfroe, Jr., Professor of Foreign Language, member; Colonel H. M. Exton, member; and Lieutenant Colonel Cranston E. Covell, recorder. If the course objective (a formal course in ethics) was to enhance the cadet's development of character, the board agreed with that purpose. However, it also strongly believed that formal instruction would *not* substantially contribute to the cadets' development.³² They based their comments on the feedback received from the instructor of an eighteen-week trial ethics course conducted in 1952.³³ The instructor stated that, "Ethical or moral philosophy is not a subject to which the majority of cadets would or could be attracted... For these reasons [and perhaps the problem of securing enough qualified instructors] ethical or moral philosophy is completely unsuitable for a regular classroom course."³⁴ The Board did suggest a series of lectures designed to increase a cadet's understanding of their personal moral standards.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Ibid. 5.

³² BG John H. Michaelis, Report and Recommendations of the Committee on Curriculum Survey, 1 April 1954, USMA Archives, 14.

³³ Ibid. 14.

³⁴ Ibid., 15.

³⁵ Ibid., 30.

However, their final recommendation concluded that no additions be made to the curriculum regarding ethics instruction.³⁶

Throughout the following decade the Academy continued along the same path. The Academic Board made periodic changes or adjustments to the curriculum as the need became apparent but continued to resist adding ethics instruction to the curriculum. During that time period one significant ethical incident occurred. In the spring of 1966, although not the magnitude of the 1951 incident, nineteen cadets resigned from the Academy because of their connection with cheating in certain physics and chemistry courses.³⁷ Additional incidents from that decade were isolated in their scope, but nevertheless demonstrated that cadets at West Point struggled with moral and ethical issues. A letter from a faculty member leaving the Academy for another assignment written to the head of his department presented several individual incidents that are worth mentioning. He wrote of his concerns about the deterioration of the Honor System at West Point and how it failed more often than it should. All his information was based on either personal recollections or incidents related to him by other members of faculty and staff. In 1966-68 blatant plagiarism occurred three different times, but the Honor Committee acquitted two of the three and punished the other with a one-month walking tour.³⁸ The letter continued with examples of cadets' lying and stealing and went on to say that relaxed enforcement of the rules and policies existed among the staff and faculty.³⁹ He also stated that cadet conduct had deteriorated and that some displayed total disregard

³⁶ Ibid., 35.

³⁷ Suzanne Christoff, USMA Archivist, Letter to Colonel (Ret) George S. Pappas, 7 March 1997.

³⁸ Unknown to Colonel Thomas E. Griess, Professor and Acting Head of Department Military Art and Engineering, 1 October 1968, USMA Archives, 2.

³⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

for authority.⁴⁰ It could be said that this was a sign of the times. The significant point is that this faculty member perceived that the Academy was failing to address these problems adequately. After reading the letter one could infer that he was probably not the only individual who witnessed similar incidents throughout the decade.

A final indication of the moral state of the Corps in the 1960s is found in the reports submitted by the Superintendent's Honor Review Committee. Early in the decade the committee reported that one company in the Corps had allowed the Honor Code and system to erode completely. In the mid-1960s, the committee reported problems of extensive quibbling and that the gap between society's definition of morality and ethics and the Academy's was widening.⁴¹ In retrospect, these observations foreshadowed many of the events that occurred in the mid-1970s. At the time though, nothing was done to respond to these problems.

The first half of the 1970s brought with it more difficult times. Especially troubling was the year 1973. External reviews by Congress, the press, and the judiciary, and increased attention from the Departments of Defense and the Army placed greater pressure on the Academy to uphold its high standards.⁴² The Supreme Court struck directly at the moral-ethical development program by ruling that mandatory chapel attendance violated the cadets' freedom of religion.⁴³ Further complicating matters, another cheating incident occurred in the Department of Physics. After the Honor

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴¹ Colonel Frederick C. Lough, Professor and Head of Department of Law to the Superintendent, 16 June 1976, USMA Archives, 1-2.

⁴² Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point, New York, 1990 USMA Archives, 291.

⁴³ Ibid., 291.

Committee's investigation, twenty of the thirty-seven cadets implicated were found guilty and either resigned or were separated from the Academy.⁴⁴ The completion of the Honor Committee's actions and its final report resulted in no further investigations.⁴⁵

The spring of 1976 brought terrible misfortune with the implication of nearly three hundred cadets in the most widespread cheating incident ever faced by the Academy. Once all the investigations were complete, one hundred fifty-two cadets either resigned or were separated.⁴⁶ The Electrical Engineering 304 (EE304) scandal was the largest and most devastating in West Point's history. It tarnished the reputation and honor of the institution and, to this day, impacts upon the Corps.

As the old saying goes, "you have nowhere to go but up once you have hit rock bottom." The EE304 incident finally opened the Academy's eyes to the recurring problems over the previous thirty years. Plunged into turmoil, the Superintendent and Secretary of the Army gave the issue their full attention.⁴⁷ Pressure to fix the problem and "protect the institution – to save it from itself,"⁴⁸ was felt from every direction. Two initial reports by different departments addressed the question of "why" early on. One report presented a five-part answer to the problem. In summary, the report stated: 1) the changes in America's societal values saw a tendency to more readily accept what was once considered unacceptable; 2) the Academy's structure had not kept pace with these changes in values; 3) the reluctance to change the academic curriculum had caused, in

⁴⁴ Unknown, Information Paper, Honor Violation in Physics Courses April 1973, 18 June 1973, USMA Archives, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point, New York, 1990, USMA Archives, 289.

⁴⁷ Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point, New York, 1990, USMA Archives, 292.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 292.

both the faculty and the cadets, serious adverse opinions regarding many of the courses; 4) recent events surrounding the Corps and its self-governed system had undermined that system; and 5) the structure of the EE304 exam itself contributed to the problem.⁴⁹ Part three of the answer provides evidence to support the argument that, since World War II the Academy repeatedly had the opportunity to proactively intervene and possibly prevent a tragedy such as this to occur. This tentative report speaks volumes about the laborious process required to revise the curriculum. Additionally, part four provides a different answer to the earlier question: Are young cadets mature enough to truly understand the meaning of ethics and the purpose of ethical conduct? This tragedy highlighted the fact that young cadets had not yet internalized the differences between right and wrong. In trying to preserve the future careers of their peers, allowing violations to go virtually unpunished is not doing the right thing. Rather, it breeds attitudes of disregard for the rules of conduct.

The second report identified two primary causes for the scandal. Interestingly, they are very similar to parts three and four of the previous report's answer. To summarize the comments of Colonel Frederick C. Lough, USMA Professor and Head of Department of Law, he stated that the primary fault resided with the Electrical Engineering Department and its tests. It was as if the instructors had set the cadets up for failure. He did not limit his point to just the Electrical Engineering Department, but commented that each academic department must work to not contribute to the problem by simplifying their procedures.⁵⁰ Additionally, he addressed the honor system. He stated

⁴⁹ Unknown Author (MADN-J) to the Superintendent, 11 June 1976, USMA Archives, 2-4.

⁵⁰ Colonel Frederick C. Lough, Professor and Head of Department of Law, 16 June 1976, USMA Archives, 4.

that it had become "a tortuous maze of processes and interpretations."⁵¹ He observed that the Honor Committee had taken the system and refined it to meet its needs and pointed out that a system such as this cannot survive for very long.⁵² In the battle to gain the majority of the cadets' time and attention, each department had placed increasing demands on the individual. In spring 1976, these demands overwhelmed several hundred cadets and because the internalization of honor had not fully occurred, the cadets opted to do the wrong thing. There are those who speculate that the instructions provided by the EE304 instructors were unclear and led to the cadets' demise. It is probably more accurate to say that the system had deteriorated so badly that the cadets did not know or understand they were acting inappropriately.

By December 1976, the Borman Commission reported its findings. The Secretary of the Army, the Honorable Martin R. Hoffman, appointed the commission in fall 1976. Chaired by Colonel (Retired) Frank Borman, a graduate and former astronaut, the commission consisted of five additional members. These members were: General (Retired) Harold K. Johnson, President, Financial General Bankshares and former Army Chief of Staff; A. Kenneth Pye, Chancellor and Dean of the School of Law, Duke University; Dr. Willis M. Tate, President Emeritus, Southern Methodist University; Bishop John T. Walker, Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Washington, and Major General Howard S. Wilcox, Chairman of the Board of Visitors.⁵³ A thorough investigation, not only into the EE304 incident, but of the entire West Point system resulted in numerous

⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

⁵² Ibid., 3.

⁵³ Frank Borman, Report to the Secretary of the Army by the Special Commission on the United States Military Academy, 15 December 1976, USMA Archives.

recommendations. Of particular importance was the recommendation to establish formal ethics instruction. The commission stated that "all cadets should be required, early in their careers at West Point, to begin formal ethics study."⁵⁴ It further recommended this course "be part of the core curriculum."⁵⁵ These were familiar words the Academy had disregarded in the past.

Six months later in July 1977, the Army Chief of Staff, General Bernard W. Rogers, commissioned the West Point Study Group to conduct another review of the Academy. Its members included Major General Hillman Dickinson, Chairman, Academic Committee; Major General Jack V. Mackmull, Chairman, Environment Committee; and Brigadier General Jack N. Merritt, Chairman, Military Professional Development Committee. The group revealed that the curriculum, for the past eight years, had included a philosophy course presenting ethical issues to First Class cadets. However, trained philosophy professors were not the instructors for this course.⁵⁶ Additionally, the group commented that, although curriculum changes had occurred over the past twenty years, they happened entirely too slowly.⁵⁷ Finally, they recommended including a thorough philosophical basis for the cadets to learn and understand the meaning of ethical standards. The group went so far as to suggest courses in philosophy and ethics, general psychology, constitutional and military law, leadership, and a seminar in American institutions.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Frank Borman, Report to the Secretary of the Army by the Special Commission on the United States Military Academy, 15 December 1976, USMA Archives, 20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁶ MG Hillman Dickinson, Chairman Academic Committee to GEN Bernard W. Rogers, Chief of Staff, Final Report of the West Point Study Group, 27 July 1977, USMA Archives, 69.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

It is not the fact that the Academy provided a philosophy course taught by untrained professors or that the Academic Board was terribly slow to make changes to the curriculum, but rather the Academy failed to establish a specific moral-ethical development program as a cornerstone to the cadets' growth. Recommendation after recommendation fell upon deaf ears at the Academy. Each review board, commission or group advocated the same revisions: add formal ethics instruction to the curriculum. Additionally, by affording the Corps complete control of the Honor System the Academy allowed the System to undermine itself. Cadets decided what was right and wrong with minimal assistance or guidance by the administration. Over time it became more important that the conduct of the Corps abide by the standards set by the Honor System rather than whether those standards were morally or ethically sound. By failing to fully realize what each review panel had recommended, West Point had set the stage for the unthinkable to occur. These results were perhaps far more devastating than the individual impact each Academic Department would have experienced by allowing formal ethics instruction into the curriculum.

By relating these events to the environment and cultural period in which they occurred, one could argue that even with formal ethics instruction, the cheating scandals would have taken place anyway. In light of the tremendous changes in societal values witnessed over those thirty years, cadets most likely arrived with beliefs other than those espoused by the Academy. Problems arose centering on the controversial issues. Although a guarantee that honor incidents would not have occurred is virtually impossible, a formal ethics course would have provided cadets *and* faculty members the opportunity to enter into discourse about those contentious issues. A healthy dialogue may have

resolved those problems or at least resulted in a common understanding of each group's beliefs. At a minimum, a formal ethics course taught to the cadets early in their careers would have reduced the magnitude of the honor violations that did occur.

The Academy has accomplished a great deal since the 1976 EE304 cheating incident to improve its course of instruction and the development of the cadets. In the last twenty years major changes have occurred to the curriculum. The core curriculum requires each cadet to take general psychology, military leadership, philosophy, constitutional and military law, American politics, and international relations.⁵⁹ Each course periodically presents ethical issues related to the topics discussed in class, providing the cadets with a solid foundation from which to build their careers. Additionally, the Brigade Tactical Department continues to teach practical ethics applications regularly throughout the entire year.

Overall, the Academy continues to develop leaders of character who desire the opportunity to serve their country. Historically, it has not failed in its mission to graduate outstanding individuals dedicated to their profession and committed to its ethics. Within the next year, West Point will establish a Center for Professional Military Ethics. Although its primary purpose is one of an outreach program for the Army, a logical additional function would be to assist the Academy in guiding and reviewing its own moral-ethical development program as we enter into the next century. An organization dedicated to this dual purpose would support the most important program the Academy conducts, thus establishing its equal status among the other three.

⁵⁹ West Point 1997-1998 Catalog, USMA Admissions Office, 32.

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