



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND PUBLIC SERVICE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: United States Air Force Academy Briefings
April 20, 2018

The following is a record of a meeting between a group of Commissioners and the participants listed below, which took place on April 20, 2018 at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in Colorado Springs, CO. The conversation was moderated by Commissioner Jeannette James. Four Commissioners present at the April meeting were also present for these conversations: Avril Haines, Alan Khazei, Tom Kilgannon, and Jeannette James. Commission staff observed at least part of the meeting. Please note that the following is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

USAFA participants:

- Air Officers Commanding (AOCs)¹
- Faculty & Staff - Member A, Member B, Member C, Member D, Member E
- Cadets

Key Takeaways:

The discussion included the following topics of particular interest:

- USAFA has targeted outreach to increase geographic diversity, particularly underrepresented Congressional districts, and women
- USAFA admissions aims initiatives at changing the makeup of the recruiting pool, not the size, and generally feels as though they are successful in recruiting and admitting strong candidates
- AOCs expressed concern over the willingness of the post-9/11 generation to serve
- A consistent theme emerged surrounding a family legacy of service being a main driver of USAFA admissions and propensity to serve

Follow Up:

Members of each team indicated they would be available and open to follow-up conversations with Commissioners and staff, in particular Member D, who spoke extensively about Selective Service and critical skills.

¹ Five AOCs were present: 3 female, 2 male; 4 Majors, 1 Lieutenant Colonel.

Meeting Discussion:

Admissions

USAFA staff opened the meeting with a mission brief video that provided an overview of the academics and lifestyle of the USAFA, including:

- The research and STEM emphasis of the school to meet the USAF's needs, and inventions of students
- The associated and cadet-instructed aviation activities
- Professors cannot do research unless cadets are involved
- The United States Air Force Academy is the No. 1 funded undergraduate research institution in the country, according to a survey conducted by the National Science Foundation.

Member A then continued the discussion by providing an overview of service in his family and his own military service, before opening the discussion for questions from the Commissioners.

Ms. Jeannette James *opened the conversation by asking about the USAFA statistics on candidates versus applicants based on the provided 2017 Demographics profile.*

Member A noted the USAFA admissions process can be broken into the following phases:

- Pre-candidate questionnaire: Filled out in the spring of junior year of high school by aspiring cadets, including self-reported test scores and grades, as well as a short essay. The USAFA then screens pre-candidates to invite those they view as competitive to become "applicants" and move forward to the candidate phase.
- Candidate: Begins summer after junior year of high school and is much more extensive, including a military medical screening, physical fitness test, teacher evaluations, test scores, grades, essays, and interviews.
- Qualified candidates: From the materials submitted in the Candidate phase the USAFA determines who are qualified candidates, both from military accessions standards as well as academic preparedness. This phase may include discussion of candidates who would benefit from attending a preparatory school, one-year programs associated with the USAFA that aim to help candidates become ready to succeed as a cadet.
- Admissions: From a pool of qualified candidates offers of admission are extended to approximately 1,400, of which approximately 1,150 accept.

Ms. Avril Haines *asked if the USAFA is getting enough applicants and the 'right' pool of applicants, also asking if there were barriers to service.*

Member A answered that accessions standards were the main barrier; mentioning criminal record, drug abuse, obesity, lack of physical fitness, and noting the pool is shrinking.

Ms. James *followed up to ask about mental health in youth today.*

Member A concurred mental health issues have been flagged, but noted that they are a challenge to screen, particularly with HIPPA laws. He noted while it is easy to diagnose and treat a broken

leg and know whether a student is physically fit, it is much harder to tell with mental health, also mentioning that students have hidden issues so as to avoid being disqualified.

He explained the USAFA recruiting strategy over the past ten years that he has been the deputy has been to increase the quality and diversity of the pool of applicants without increasing the size of the pool of applicants. A large piece of this is awareness, and the USAFA has a very data-driven marketing and outreach operation, targeted populations that meet the needs of the Air Force. There are always cadets from each Congressional district, and Title 10 implies the importance of nation-wide coverage, so the officer corps is from the entire country. He noted for recruiting they target high-eligible, low-propensity areas, because the high-propensity area “feeder schools” don’t require the resources and will apply anyways. He mentioned geographic diversity as a driver of other forms of intellectual and demographic diversity, and that they have been recruiting the “right kinds of kids” to get a more diverse, qualified, candidate pool.

He noted kids in college learn 70% outside of the classroom, from one another, and each cadet is an influence on their squadron mates. He mentioned they are working at underrepresented areas, and that a lot of recruiting/admissions is art not science, to get from 2,600 qualified candidates to the 1,400 admitted each year, but that they don’t need 6,000 qualified or 18,000 applying because they don’t have the resources to process that kind of influx. He noted with the current strategy they have cut the number of underrepresented congressional districts by half over the past five years. He mentioned it is critical to know who the community influencers are. Member A mentions that USAFA has established a diversity plan and female representation has risen from 17.7% in 2009 to 27.4% in 2021. He also noted the yield rate is very high for any university, at 86%, and that the financial package is a big driver for low-income students, many of whom send their monthly pay back home to help.

AOCs

Ms. James *opened the conversation by asking why each officer chose to join the Air Force, whether they attended USAFA, and why they chose (if they chose) to become an AOC.*

One AOC noted he was prior enlisted and planning to get out after seven years but his Gulf War experience made him want to stay in. From leading field training he learned he loved people development and found it incredibly satisfying, which made this role a great opportunity. He noted in preparation for this discussion he reviewed 100+ CRP2 files of why cadets noted they came to USAFA and listed the following as the top cited reasons:

1. Patriotism/To serve country/Time to do my part
2. Family legacy
3. To become a pilot
4. D1 athletics
5. Challenge
6. Running from something

He noted most cadets’ “Why?” is transformed over their time at the USAFA, and that’s part of their role as AOCs.

Mr. Tom Kilgannon followed up by asking about the role of pay/free tuition in the choice to attend the USAFA.

The same AOC estimated 10 out of 107 records he reviewed noted the financial opportunities, but also acknowledged it may not be something students chose to write down. Another AOC added that for students coming out of high school, USAFA provides a straight shot of free education and a guaranteed job, with everything taken care of, and that's very appealing. A third AOC added the opportunity to not have to worry and stress about their future is valuable and allows them to focus.

Ms. James asked in the files mentioned, other than the family legacy, did they have any sense of whether cadets were people who had volunteerism in their history.

One AOC noted the 8% legacy statistic is only for military academy graduates and the statistic only covered parents and the rest often have someone in their family who inspired them to serve in the military and most had family members that taught the value of service. The AOC noted many come from a prep school, military academy, or JROTC.

Mr. Kilgannon referred to patriotism as the number one reason listed and asked, other than through family, how cadets had developed that value.

An AOC noted the September 11 generation children have grown up at war with parents tying a yellow ribbon. Next year will be the first post-September 11 babies at the USAFA and this AOC believes it will be harder to keep up the momentum of service. Another AOC added that she knew she wanted to be part of something bigger but didn't know about the military or consider it until junior or senior year of high school.

Mr. Alan Khazei mentioned the idea of a cultural expectation of at least a year of service and asked how they felt and they thought cadets would react.

An AOC noted it is a great idea but that the whole system would have to be easier to join, noting government jobs take forever, and that maybe there is an opportunity to capitalize on the idea of a gap year by providing government opportunities. Another AOC noted the USAFA high school and college summer internship program is a good model, it provides exposure to different things and it is easier to get summer hires and interns, might be worth expanding across military bases.

Mr. Khazei asked what they think about women registering for Selective Service?

The group seemed to agree that women should register both for purposes of equity and to access the best talent. There were questions as to why women wouldn't be expected to register/what counterarguments might be.

Ms. James *asked aside from equity issues what they saw as the value of requiring women to register.*

A male AOC noted the Air Force is big on diversity and inclusion, because it makes them better. He notes if women are in combat jobs he does not see why they should not register. A female AOC mentioned different perspectives are valuable and she doesn't know why the country would not. She noted it levels the playing field and may remove some frustration among men if there is a draft, and that women want to be equal.

Ms. James *asked if they can identify any barriers to overcome for cadets to get to/succeed at USAFA.*

One AOC noted that recruiting today versus 20-30 years ago, the USAFA recruits across geographic areas and socioeconomic classes and some cadets don't have the parental support. Another noted there are often academic/aptitude barriers for D1 athletes, and they struggle to succeed in such a rigorous program. Another mentioned the cultural expectation of taking care of one's family and being at home which can cause cadets stress and guilt. Finally, one mentioned international students might struggle with language barriers.

Mr. Kilgannon *asked about the honor code.*

An AOC noted not all adhere to the honor code, and for some it's a catchphrase. He noted last year the cadets stole the word "steal" off of the honor wall. Another AOC added the "Integrity, Service, Excellence" motto is viewed by many as buzzwords as well. A third AOC added it's the role of an AOC to connect the dots on values for cadets. The second AOC noted the social dynamics of generations, this is the loneliest generation due to ties to their devices, and asks what the Commission is learning in terms of patriotism for the upcoming generation.

Ms. James *mentioned it was only our second stop and we are still in the learning process, but that she's seen a desire to help people, but they don't necessarily know the how.*

An AOC noted that medical disqualifications from the military don't know about other options to serve, and there's a need to promote options to serve in a lot of different ways.

Mr. Khazei *asked the AOCs why they chose to serve.*

All but one AOC had a family connection to service that inspired their choice to join the military.

Faculty/Staff

Ms. Haines *opened the conversation by asking what critical skills they could identify, such as Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) pilots or cyberwarfare skills, and whether they should be added to SSS registration.*

Member D noted it is a challenge and he believes we need to identify folks with skills for the high fight domain. He noted cyber is different from RPA pilot in that someone who is trained in cyber could be high value added immediately; whereas for an RPA pilot, which for the USAF is larger classes of UAVs and uses the same training pipeline and personnel as F-16 pilots – there is no translation from civilian drone usage.² He posed the question of changing the incentive structure of having those critical skills if the military were to begin pulling people e.g. Amazon, suggesting that the civilian population would be disinclined to pursue skills targeted by a critical-skills draft. He mentioned the CRAF model for pilots/window of time model for the cyber industry. He concluded by again noting in a full high fight the ability to quickly identify citizens with critical skillsets would be hugely important to the DoD and national security community. Member C added that for RPA pilots they need to be volunteers for rated service. He noted there's not a big market/outside capability, and that RPAs for military are much closer to an F-16 than commercially available drones. It is a yearlong pipeline prior to being operational, and the same pipeline as manned pilots. Member D added instead of a draft you reimagine the guard/reserve and keep it as a ready strategic reserve force rather than using the SSS.

Ms. James *followed up on the CRAF suggestion, asking about calling people up for the national front?*

Member D added [Mandiant](#) [for example] doesn't have Title 10 authorities to pursue offensive cyber operations. However, under a CRAF-model, the company could gain those authorities and convert to military support using on-hand skillsets - a model very different from the SSS.

Mr. Kilgannon *asked about college or a sabbatical, or a year of leave to serve the military?*

Member D added that's basically the reserves. He notes the military won't win the next cyber fight alone, and we will need the ability to rapidly convert. Suggests integration with Title 50 authorities.

Member B added there is a level of diversity that is badly needed in national security and national policy. He notes the last SSS did that badly, and it's an impetus for change. He notes USAFA is finally breaking 30% gender diversity.

Mr. Khazei *asked what Col Swoveland thought of creating an expectation for a year of service, and what incentives would be needed?*

Member B said that he is a strong believer that every youth is a patriot, but [those that work for the U.S. government] must convince all that the government works for them. The majority of students were more willing to help fellow cadets and the country than in the past. But more work needs to be done to create a better narrative.

² Civilian drone usage, including the FAA UAS operator certification, are almost entirely for systems under 55 lbs.

Member E responded to obstacles for many students being the cost of college tuition today, which is outpaced only by healthcare. He suggested that marketing should convey that the military is a job for now and skillset for post-military life, and emphasize those incentive structures.

Mr. Kilgannon *asked if it is wise/feasible to create a public service academy in the model of the military academies.*

Member D mentioned the mission would be very broad and the academies are currently able to operate the way they do because they're very targeted. He liked the idea, but for what target? What capabilities would graduates need? Member E added it would encourage civil engagement at the college level.

Ms. Haines *asked about military recruiting.*

Member B noted military recruiting [and accession policy] is not terribly flexible. He explained that it is possible to bring in a contractor, without having the same individual taken into the military, and have them serve the exact same purpose and mission using the same skills. He posited the military needs to be better at acknowledging that capability comes from a variety of sources. He noted not everyone needs to serve in the military.

Ms. James *asked if considering tattoos/healthcare/marijuana is legal, should the military relax barriers?*

Member B responded it's a viable option for very specific skillsets, but not for infantry or pilots. Could work for cyber. Member D gave a hypothetical of "Mark," an incredibly talented encryption breaker who would struggle terribly in the military because he would fail to meet weight and health standards, but the military needed a mechanism to use his talents.