

The US Air Force Academy: Elite Undergraduate College?

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Life at a service academy, at least at the US Air Force Academy (AFA), is in many ways similar to life at any other college. There are classrooms, instructors, lesson plans, a dean, department heads, and a registrar's office. There are dorms, campus food, and students who covet beer. There are also several options in which a student can choose a major, be involved in a variety of clubs, and participate in varsity or intramural sports. On the academic side, instructors typically teach three or four courses each semester, unless they are assigned to extra administrative duty, in which case the load is usually two courses. That sounds pretty typical for a selective all-undergraduate school. There are also service and research expectations, though overall, service is more important than research—at least, in my experience. The majority of the faculty are Air Force officers who rotate in and out of the academy on a three to four year tour. They come from a variety of Air Force specialties, from pilots and navigators to intelligence officers and ground support. Therefore, most faculty are not career academics but are on a single tour of duty that is often considered a boondoggle to rank and file military members. These officers typically do not have a terminal degree, yet they are the most common at the academy and are burdened with the heaviest teaching loads. But the fact that most faculty are military officers

and relatively undereducated is just the beginning of some of the differences I've found between the AFA and regular academia.

A Different Sort of Uniform

I have a somewhat unique perspective on the US Air Force Academy and academia. When I finished my PhD in 2000, instead of taking a post-doc or tenure-track job, I joined the Navy as a "research psychologist." My first assignment was in research and development in support of American warfighters, which in my case was performing sleep and fatigue research in Navy shore-based laboratories as well as onboard submarines. However, after less than four years of active service, I was offered the chance to teach at the AFA in an officer exchange program, a program that allows members of a "sister" service to work at one of the military academies. I was to be a Navy officer in a khaki uniform teaching among a sea of Air Force blue. I jumped at the chance. I thought that in this way I could be like a regular assistant professor in academia while still pursuing my career as a military officer. Since my background is from a family of academics, and I had taught numerous courses as an adjunct at several civilian colleges, I thought I knew what to expect.

Upon my arrival I was welcomed at a large, well-organized new faculty orientation that lasted two full weeks. Long, I suppose, since there is so much turnover at the AFA (about 120–140 new faculty report each year out of about 700 total) and there is much to learn. One hint that this was not a regular college was that the first thing I learned was that there are no "students" at the AFA, there are "cadets," implying that these undergraduates are military members first and college students second.

At the department level, there is tremendous variance in attitudes, customs, courtesies, and acumen for academia, even though the Air Force prides itself on its uniform homogeneity. My department was well run by an academically oriented colonel, but after a couple of years at the AFA, I began to think that he may have been one of the exceptions. Academics, it seemed to me,

took a back seat to military training, athletics, religiosity, and other ethereal constructs such as “character building.”

But the problem may not originate with the department heads. The overarching academic and military climate at the AFA is set by the upper echelons of command, mostly out of reach from a department head, much like how at civilian schools, a department head is typically far afield from top administrators. But unlike the top “command” at a civilian school, with deans and a provost and a myriad of vice presidents who cut their teeth in the trenches of academia after obtaining a terminal degree, at the AFA, almost none of the top administrators have any academic experience or the academic degrees required for such a position at a college. Even the president of the AFA (called the “superintendent,” a three-star general) rarely has a university conferred master’s degree, let alone a doctorate. He does have a master’s, as all generals do, but his was likely conferred from a war college, or perhaps an online school, and often not in a traditional academic discipline.

Naturally, all superintendents of the AFA have been intelligent, accomplished men (no women yet), and many were Air Force heroes with air combat experience, but none have earned the obligatory academic degrees that are standard in modern academia. None have ever had positions of leadership in any civilian college or university. Most have never taught even at a military school. Perhaps that doesn’t matter—maybe a PhD or experience in academia is not important to lead in military education. It isn’t required in other military settings, of course. Nevertheless, this is an academic institution first, right? This is what the AFA tells cadets’ parents. It is certainly what the AFA told the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools when the academy underwent accreditation review in 2008. Shouldn’t the leaders be better educated or know more about academia before taking the helm of such an influential institution? This can and does backfire for the academy. For example, the dean used to brag openly about how 55 percent of the faculty have terminal degrees, as though that were a high percentage. She didn’t even know that such a low percentage should be something to be embarrassed about, and that many community colleges exceed it. I wrote her a

note to ask her to stop saying that (as I am sure many others did) and I never heard her say it again. She just didn't know — she doesn't understand academia on the whole, because she is a career officer, like all the leaders at the AFA.

What if the situation were reversed? I was once with a colleague of mine when he asked a group of cadets, "If college presidents around the country, most with little military experience, decided to form their own army, how good would that army be compared to the real army?" Cadets responded with laughter at the thought of how poorly disciplined and weak that unit would be. Then my friend asked, "What if a group of generals and colonels, most with little academic experience, decided to start their own college, how good would that school be compared to other colleges?" No laughter.

Based on my observations, graduate school training plays no role for top leaders of the AFA. What is more important is where the top three generals received their undergraduate degree. The top three — the superintendent, the commandant (similar to a dean of students) and the dean of the faculty (who is more like a provost) — are all AFA grads. In fact, the last several decades have found the AFA run almost entirely by its own graduates. Additionally, the superintendent typically has what the Air Force sees as the most essential educational requirement — graduating from pilot training. Becoming a pilot is the sine qua non for prestige in the Air Force and at the AFA. Perhaps that makes sense: one might argue that it is the Air Force, after all, and they need pilots to be in charge of a school that teaches aviation. But the truth is that there is no true pilot qualifying at the AFA. This surprises some people. To go to Air Force pilot training, one must first have a college degree. The degree can be in any subject and be from any college. Moreover, only about half of the AFA's graduating cadets even go to pilot training. The rest go to the many other specialties offered by the Air Force such as maintenance, acquisitions, security forces, and special operations. Furthermore, with American air power moving more and more toward unmanned drones to deliver weapons, the distinction of a fighter pilot as warrior and mentor to future Air Force officers is now less apposite.

Out of the Navy

After nearly three years teaching at the AFA while wearing a Navy uniform, the time eventually came when the Navy said that my assignment was over and I needed to return to the Fleet. I demurred, as I loved teaching and very much enjoyed the cadets, as well as my departmental faculty members. Plus, I was just getting my research program running nicely and felt that leaving would be bad timing for my scholarly and teaching ideas. So I decided to leave the active Navy and take a civilian position at the AFA. In effect, I was leaving the majority (approximately 75 percent of faculty are military) and becoming one of the minority, the other people, the regular academics. I kept the same office but started showing up in civilian clothes and making about 20 percent less in salary.

The faculty salaries are actually pretty good for an undergraduate college with little research expectations. Most civilian full professors easily make six figures, even in psychology, which is generally not a lucrative discipline. But there are several instructors at the AFA with only a master's degree who also make six figures. How can this be? Because officers on faculty get paid whatever their rank would indicate. For example, an Air Force major (a mid-manager rank) with twelve years in service makes about \$100,000, whether he works as an analyst for the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) or as an instructor at the AFA. The pay is also the same whether the major has a doctorate or master's degree (or just a bachelor's degree). So it makes some sense that most officers at the academy do not have a terminal degree since there may be little motivation to pursue a doctorate. After all, most of the officers are there for one tour and then it is back to flying or missileering or another task. Some officers do want to get a PhD, since it is required to become permanently assigned to the AFA, but they must be sponsored by the Air Force to obtain it, and it is competitive. If an officer is selected for a PhD tour, it is a sweet deal for that fortunate person. He may attend any university he wants and still receive full pay (many are majors when they get selected for PhD). So these lucky officers in effect have \$100,000 stipends plus free health care and full military benefits as they pursue the ivory tower's highest degree. On-campus life for them is virtually devoid of military

obligations, such as wearing a uniform, as they hob-nob with other grad students who may wonder how they can drive a new SUV, drink high-end scotch, live in a big house, and raise a family on a graduate student fellowship.

Often, after completing their degrees, they return to the AFA to finish their careers. Typically at this point they become lieutenant colonels, and as new PhDs they are assistant professors now making about \$120,000. Other than the sobering fact that these officers are still subject to being deployed (one of my former AFA colleagues was killed in Afghanistan), being an officer assigned to the AFA can sound like one of the best deals in academia.

The Military Ivory Tower

But how good is it at the AFA, really? New civilian assistant professors make about half what a lieutenant colonel makes, and there are a multiplicity of requirements that would look foreign, even dreadful, to most academics. All faculty, civilian or military, are required to be in their offices every day by 7:30 a.m. even if they have no morning classes. If an instructor is traveling to a conference or if he is sick, he will need to find a substitute teacher. Classes are not to be canceled except under “extraordinary” circumstances, and attending a conference or being sick is not extraordinary. Complicating things is that all substitute teachers must be from the permanent faculty at the academy (that is, no guest lecturers from the “outside” can fill in; they wouldn’t make it past security). If an instructor desires lab space for research, as I did, he is warned that “doing research takes away from your performance in the classroom.” A senior military faculty member told me this in my second year.

Research can and does get done of course, but don’t expect much support from the academy unless it involves aerospace engineering or other machismo driven research, like aircraft structural integrity, propulsion physics, or ordnance research. That is, science should be about flying or space travel or at least blowing things up, and it absolutely must relate to Air Force operations. Once, after I proposed some basic science research to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I was scolded offline by an officer who said, “You know, Jeff, the Air Force does pay your

salary,” implying that it was inane that I do basic science and that I was beholden to the academy to do research that candidly and directly benefitted the AFA since it employs me.

Another unusual regulation is that if an AFA instructor wants to leave his office for reasons other than teaching, say to go to lab area and collect data, he may do so only if his supervisor approves the absence. If approved, he must post his name on a common board indicating where he is and when he will return. Also, during my new faculty orientation, I was told that posting office hours is technically not required. Since students are encouraged to visit instructors at any time during duty hours, the de facto office hours for faculty are from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. every day, not counting lunch, as cadets eat at the exact same time and are not able to visit with teachers. The Princeton Review repeatedly honors the academy for these stringent office hours by awarding the AFA the top rating for “instructor accessibility.” Many faculty, especially civilians, grumble at what some consider draconian demands that make writing, grading, and prepping in one’s office nearly impossible. One former civilian colleague even suggested that if Princeton had a rating for “professors who feel most chained to their desks” the AFA would win that one, too.

As mentioned, the AFA’s instructors are generally well paid and it might be assumed that civilian professors are treated as salaried professionals. This is not really true, as they are technically paid by the hour. Each civilian faculty member must turn in a signed time card to his supervisor (who may be a military officer with substantially less academic experience). The supervisor, in turn, signs the document, which is sent to the secretary and reviewed by the department head. Our time at the academy, however, is not scrutinized very carefully. Regardless of our actual work hours, the time cards are required to state that we are in our offices from 7:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. each day. Even if a teacher arrives early or stays late, or if a teacher is not in at all due to travel or illness, he is required to sign a time card that says he was in the office. We are technically paid by the hour; but our hours are always listed at forty per week, reality notwithstanding. Meanwhile, the AFA insists that signing such a record in the

absence of any reality, “cannot be considered a falsified record.” The military faculty do not sign any such document.

Why Civilians Anyway?

The fact that civilians are even on the faculty still causes some animosity at the academy. The AFA has only had an integrated military and civilian faculty since a 1994 act of Congress.¹ From its inception in 1954 until then, all full-time instructors were military officers. The passage of this act chafed the Air Force brass. The idea that civilians in Congress would tell them what to do provoked them to circumvent the mandate by attempting to hire many of their own. That is, a striking number of new civilian hires in 1994 and now are retired Air Force officers, which is not what Congress had intended. Incidentally, the strategy backfired a bit when a report headed by retired Navy Admiral Charles Larson chided the Air Force for its thinly cloaked inbreeding.² The Naval Academy and West Point apparently didn’t do that. In fact, the Naval Academy has always had integrated civilian and officer instructors from its beginning in 1845, including a civilian dean. Indeed, half the faculty are tenured or tenure-track civilians.

Tenure, in and out of the military, is contentious at many levels, of course. Administrators around the country tend to frown on it while faculty hold fast to it. No AFA civilian instructor has tenure, but the military officers do. If a young military officer in his first tour is a terrible instructor, he may lose his teaching job, but he will still be in the military and will get reassigned elsewhere based on his Air Force specialty. That may not sound like academic tenure, but it is excellent job security for most officers. The department heads, relatively seasoned with multiple tours as instructor, then professor, have true tenure and may remain at their positions until forced to retire at age sixty-four at the rank of brigadier general. In fact, before civilians arrived, department heads were called “tenured professors” but are now called “permanent professors.” Civilians, in contrast, must sign a new contract each year that they hope and pray their department head will provide. The department head has complete authority to renew a civilian contract. No committees, just one person. This has been a sore spot

for civilians at the academy, especially those civilians who come directly from academia. Many civilians at the AFA complain about the lack of tenure but they won't likely win a tenure system soon. The best that the AFA's top leadership have offered was providing department heads the option of offering up to a five year contract that rolls each year. It is a sort of mini-tenure with review, but the AFA will never say "tenure" as it makes many Air Force commanders cringe, though, ironically, they themselves have it.

When you grade a student, are you, as the instructor in charge, best suited to assign an appropriate grade? Not as the AFA sees it. That would be the role of the dean of the faculty, who informs incoming students and their families that it is the office of the dean which assigns grades, as if it is she who reviews them all personally. Of course, in a school of 4,400 students, that would be impossible, but instructors are warned not to state that they assign the grades, as instructors of record simply make a "recommendation" to the dean. Additionally, there are multiple layers within each department that review all assessment grades from an instructor, both at midterm and end of semester, before the registrar receives anything. For example, instructors are to print out all grades with student names attached, calculate how many As, Bs, Cs, etc, and stack each printout in proper order. Then, instructor turns in grades to a departmental division head, who reviews the grade distribution, grade reports, and averages and compares them to a historical standard. The division head then turns in all grades to the deputy department head for academics. He collects grade reports from each division head and reviews for historical standards, and may request additional information or a rationale from an instructor. Finally, the academic head will turn in grades to the department head, who reviews them as mentioned above. Presumably, they are then taken to the Registrar for the Dean to review, but that is far afield from me. At any of these levels, an individual instructor may be told to change a grade. This does happen. It happened to me my first year at the AFA when I had spent extra time working with cadets on a writing assignment. The assignment was required for all cadets taking introductory psychology, across about forty sections and taught by fifteen instructors. My class grades on that required rotation were higher than anyone else's

section, so I was told to re-grade to a lower average in order to be “fair.” I changed them as ordered. Consequently, I never spent extra time on required assignments again.

“Fuzzy” Research at the AFA

I do research in human performance as a function of different environmental situations. For example, how magnetic fields perturb the body’s proteins which may, in turn, affect behavior, or how sleep deprivation alters performance, mood, and health. I tried to weave these ideas into small research projects that would serve as independent study projects for cadets interested in graduate school and experimental psychology as possible careers. As long as I kept my research ideas to surveys and simple activity monitoring without external funding, I was mostly ok. However, my training in the Navy involved making contacts with external funding and I assumed the Air Force would encourage grant writing to support cadet involved research. On paper and in lip service, it certainly does, as there are many research programs at the academy, especially in engineering, that are impressive for a small school.

But human research is not something administrators at the AFA understand very well. In fact, social science research is derogatively referred to as “fuzzy” at the AFA, not like the respected “techie” research in hard sciences and engineering. For this reason, almost anything requiring time from a cadet in my studies (such as use of established neuropsychology assessments on a computer, hooking cadets up with electrodes to monitor brain activity, or paying cadets as incentive for their participation) was met with utmost suspicion. The IRB at the AFA is filled with many high ranking full-bird colonels, most of whom have never engaged in science. This led to many difficult IRB proposal rounds that have sometimes ended badly. In fact, my inability to get many protocols approved (leading to many ruined cadet projects) is largely what led me to leave the academy. It seemed to me that the rules that govern the academy were set in the pre-enlightenment era. As I mentioned, any research project that doesn’t directly advance the US Air Force is treated with mistrust. At every IRB meeting, I had to answer the question of how my research would benefit the Air Force. The IRB didn’t

appreciate my philosophical retorts like “all science furthers knowledge and furthering knowledge is good not only for the Air Force but for our society.” They seemed to actually believe that any research should directly benefit the Air Force. And since much of my research involved measuring the performance decrements that occur every day at the academy because cadets are dramatically sleep deprived, it appeared to them that my research served only to make the AFA look bad. On the contrary, my motivation was actually to improve the Air Force, but it wasn’t in a manner they were familiar with or favorable toward.

Yet I pursued my research anyway. It all ended when I had to redact a grant from the Office of Naval Research because, among other reasons, the AFA’s top ranking “judge advocate” informed me that obtaining external grants for the use of research is illegal at the AFA. I pointed out to him that I had already obtained grants from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the National Science Foundation and used those funds in support of cadet-led research. He stated bluntly, “That is against the law.” Apparently he believed that there was a conflict of interest in the use of federal funds to support research at a federal college. Incidentally, the same judge advocate and I had butted heads years earlier when I established a charter for the national honor society in psychology (Psi Chi). He told me that this was not allowed due to a conflict of interest because it would look like the Air Force condones a specific honor society. In other words, it doesn’t matter how much a student might benefit from a society or a research project, the institution must be protected first and foremost. In any case, I finally came to the conclusion that the AFA was not best for me.

But who it is best for? I know the AFA produces excellent officers and citizens for our country. But I can’t help wonder how these individuals would have done if they had gone to civilian schools and utilized ROTC scholarships or even gone through the shorter Officer Training School (OTS)? Would they be worse officers, or better? Might there be no difference? I don’t know the answers, but neither does the AFA. We do know that it is five to ten times cheaper for taxpayers to commission officers through ROTC or OTS than a service academy,³ but the AFA dismisses such claims as irrelevant. It will lay claim to impressive alumni loyalty

and to the successes and awards their graduates have rightly earned. But could this be an example of confirmation bias? Are they examining the best of their graduates and attributing their success to one institution, when perhaps the officers would have achieved highly in any case? I've asked academy officers if they have any metric to indicate that AFA grads are superior to ROTC or OTS grads and there is never even the most cursory response. Most grads will glare at you with indignation at the idea that they are not superior to their fellow officers who didn't have to prove themselves via the rigors of a military academy. Besides, ROTC or OTS students attended classes and did tequila shots shoulder to shoulder with a great foe—civilians who never “serve.”

Overall, I was saddened by the anti-intellectual environment of this prestigious academy. Learning for the sake of learning was all but anathema. The words “liberal education” would raise eyebrows, as if such phrasing is an affront to the conservatism that the AFA is known for. Combine this attitude with a faculty that may comprise a group of the least educated college instructors in the entire country and you have the basic framework of the US Air Force Academy. I stayed as long as I did because I truly loved the cadets—they are special and talented. Many get sucked into the academy propaganda, which is understandable since most arrive when they are only seventeen or eighteen years old. I told more than one cadet that the prestige of the AFA rests not on the accomplishments of the faculty but on the ability of the academy to attract gifted students. Though they don't know it, they may have been even better off had they gone somewhere else.

Jeff Dyche served on active duty for eight years and as a reservist for three. While at the Air Force Academy he was promoted to associate professor and honored with an “Outstanding Academy Educator” award. He was honorably discharged from the US Navy Reserves in 2010 and took an appointment at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA. As of August, he will be an associate professor with tenure in the Department of Psychology at JMU.

Notes

¹ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1993, Pub. L. 102-484, Sec. 523 (1992).

² Charles Larson, *Study and Report Related to Permanent Professors at the US Air Force Academy* (US Air Force, 2004).

³ *Comparative Analysis of ROTC, OCS, and Service Academies as Commissioning Sources* (Athens, GA: Tench Francis School of Business, Navy Supply Corps School, November 19, 2004).