

Evaluating Frameworks for Diversity and Inclusion in Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps

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## Introduction

In the wake of racial turmoil in the United States leading into 2021, I had the privilege to sit down with a group of military veterans, academics, entrepreneurs, and coaching staff from various professional sports teams. I fell backward into the opportunity to meet on a regular basis with the group through the (then Cleveland Indians) now Cleveland Guardians Educational Development Team. The group meets with simple purposes in mind, to create opportunities for academic connections and to spread best practices in leadership and teamwork to a teachable cohort of lifelong learners. I mostly listen to the cumulative wisdom of the group on all matters, from leadership to behavioral psychology. We spent one particular day discussing organizational climate regarding creating a culture of diversity and inclusion. Our main speaker began by telling a story.

The narrative was a retelling from R. Roosevelt Thomas' *Building a House for Diversity*. In the style of a children's fable, he began his story with two unlikely friends, an elephant and a giraffe. The giraffe was a carpenter of great skill and built a beautiful home in a small community. The house's specifications were designed to accommodate the giraffe's long neck and thin frame. When the giraffe befriends an elephant in the same neighborhood, also an excellent woodworker, the two decide that the elephant should come to view the giraffe's home. The elephant encounters immediate difficulty moving about the house. When he makes a mess in his new friend's home, the giraffe concludes that the elephant should work to lose the extra weight. The elephant considers the proposal but offers that maybe the house was always meant for a giraffe and could only ever work for an elephant if there were significant changes. The fable draws simple parallels to our modern-day social and business structures. If we build our

organizations to help specific groups succeed, then it follows that organizational outsiders will struggle to thrive.

Such can be the case in the United States Air Force today, and there are renewed and even exhaustive efforts to identify and heal the divides that are present in our current military culture. Air Force leadership recognizes now, more than ever, that there are parts of our house that need to be rebuilt. The Air Force is taking steps to address issues leading to a less representative force. "In June 2020, former Secretary of the Air Force Barbara Barrett stood up a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, which has evolved into this new office. The organization will work directly for the Secretary of the Air Force and continue to address the strategic impact of diversity, inclusion, and equity on Airmen, Guardians, and their families" (Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs). These increased efforts are focused on the widespread analysis of broader cultural narratives and their effect on our force. However, it is crucial that our efforts focus on the squadron level. Squadrons are groups of about 150 personnel who share common specialties and mission objectives. Those squadron-type units are similar to the structures of the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program where the Air Force trains college students to commission as officers in the Air Force or Space Force.

The United States Air Force (USAF) is a highly selective organization with a rigorous process for acceptance into its leadership ranks. The spectrum of requirements to be assessed into the Air Force Officer Corps covers aspects from physical and academic to emotional and social skills needed to lead men and women in complex warfare environments. The Air Force recognizes the need for a diverse perspective from its officers to meet the enduring demand for the care of Airmen who accomplish their mission. Air Force Instruction 36-7001 broadly defines diversity as "a composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with

the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force Mission. Air Force diversity includes but is not limited to: personal life experiences, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural knowledge, educational background, work experience, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical and spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity, and gender” (3). This definition broadly underscores our belief that “Diversity is part of our DNA. America's strength is even greater than the sum of its parts. Our best qualities as a nation shine through when we embrace different cultures, backgrounds, and ways of thinking” (McDew).

Building on this understanding, the Air Force is still working to produce more female officers and officers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. According to data from the 2021 Professional Officer Corps Selection Process Board provided by Air Force ROTC Headquarters, female officer candidates made up only 32% of the officers selected for commissioning. Additionally, African American, Asian, and Hispanic candidates represented only 33% of selected candidates. While the number of ethnic minority candidates is edging closer to a number that looks like the U.S. national demography, the Air Force is actively identifying the underlying cultural issues present in our ranks. So, the USAF must balance the need for a diverse officer corps with its high academic, mental, and physical standards.

The resulting challenge is significant. Should individual units seek change for the sake of prioritizing diversity within the force or hold to long-held officer archetypes? Clearly, there is a need for both. The struggle to balance the need for a diverse officer corps with the responsibility to commission academically and emotionally competent leaders remains a key item of interest for Air Force ROTC leadership. The Commander of Air Force ROTC, Colonel Christopher Bennett, commented, “this is a tough challenge. We need our officers to look like the nation, but

we also need to make sure that we hold ourselves to a high standard. We need to prioritize recruiting talent from diverse backgrounds”.

Modern military leaders look towards great examples of leaders for inspiration. The challenge of ROTC environments is contextualizing those examples of battlefield management to the collegiate environment. There are a host of additional stressors within the college environment that steal attention from leadership development. This thesis argues that in order to increase the success of female and ethnic minority officer candidates across the enterprise, individual ROTC units must understand their local socio-ethnic and gender contexts and adopt practices for supporting appropriate social, academic, and physical resources that produce equity of opportunity. Successful Air Force officer candidates balance the typical college student experience through academic study, physical and social wellness, and the support of a team of motivated peers.

The following will introduce the ROTC context and its inherent challenges for officer candidates. Research themes will include an exploration of current and historical trends of racial and gender disparity across the Air Force, as well as fieldwork assessing challenges within a local ROTC unit. While there are elements of appreciative inquiry in this project, the research portion attempts to prioritize an action research approach in order to represent qualitative data to an Air Force chain of command. The attached ROTC Cultural Guide is an action-based solution that incorporates the thoughts and experiences of cadet stakeholders. The guide is informed by “viewpoints within the academic and bureaucratic literature” (Stringer 213) and firsthand knowledge to present collaborative solutions for cadet success in the ROTC environment.

## **Context**

In nearly a decade as an Air Force officer, I have traveled extensively, experiencing the grand, sprawling scale of beautiful places and some places I would rather not recount. In July of 2020, I walked up the concrete steps of Memorial Hall at Bowling Green State University, and as much as I wanted to feel removed or somehow grown beyond my time as a student there, the building felt frozen in time a decade later. Not larger or smaller. I noted the façade of the imposing structure with peeling paint on the windows perched at the top of the old arena creating the same atmosphere as an abandoned factory. Lonely yet peaceful. I opened the glass door and felt a hint of cool air rush past me, carrying a familiar and distinct musty smell. The first office in the hall is mine, proudly bearing my name placard “Captain Matthew Fagan.” This space is nothing special to most people, but to me, the painted concrete walls of what used to be an office for the cadet staff heard the deep conversations, struggles, and triumphs of a young me. Reflecting on those moments, I knew that these walls heard the others too—others who did not meet with the same hospitality.

I felt incredibly blessed to be back at my alma mater on a special assignment to instruct Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets as they learned to lead, follow, and care for those under their charge. I found a love for teaching that I knew was lying beneath the surface but rarely had occasion to exercise. The responsibility is not without cost, though. One of the most challenging parts of my job is seeing young men and women with high leadership potential struggle or fail to meet academic or physical standards.

The first time I saw Cadet Maxwell, he was a lanky young man standing at the front of a formation, calling out commands for a stretching routine at the start of physical training. He stood out as the only black officer candidate in his class and represented a very small minority in Bowling Green, Ohio. Most of our evaluation standards include confidence under stress, military

bearing, communication skills, and emotional intelligence. Cadet Maxwell stood out as an excellent officer candidate in his class by those measures. He shared aspirations to become the first military officer in his family, which has a long and proud history of military service. A semester later, Cadet Maxwell reported to my office. He walked to my desk and rendered a salute before I invited him to take a seat. Cadet Maxwell's body language told me that he knew what was coming. He slumped forward and struggled to make eye contact while I delivered the news that he had failed the Air Force Officer's Qualifying Test (AFOQT) for the second time. Cadet Maxwell knew that cadets are only allowed two attempts to pass the exam before having to appeal to ROTC Headquarters to take it a third time. Passing the AFOQT is a requirement for all officers. I recall struggling to think of the words to console someone who may fail in accomplishing his childhood dream.

To our staff, the possibility of losing Cadet Maxwell from our program was significant as he represented a form of diversity that we know the Air Force needs. Our perspectives were shared by the broader Air Force, which has openly recognized a lack of proportional representation of black officers compared to the U.S. population. In 2020, the Air Force Inspector General published an Independent Racial Disparity Review highlighting, among other issues, the fact that "enlisted black service members are overrepresented in accessions when compared to their proportion of the eligible U.S. population. Black service members are underrepresented in operational career fields and overrepresented in support career fields, which may affect their promotion opportunities" (Inspector General 4). Additionally, black officers and pilots are underrepresented.

A year after its creation in 1947, the United States Air Force responded to President Truman's 1948 Executive Order 9981, calling for "equal treatment within the military services



without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin”(Wolk). Following the order, the Air Force became the first military service branch to integrate their segregated black units. In the same year, the Air Force responded to the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, allowing women to serve in any military branch for the first time in the nation’s history. While the initial steps towards diversity and inclusion were promising, the modern-day Air Force is straining under the lasting effects of racial and gender inequality brought about by policies, social norms, and organizational structures in the United States writ large over the last 74 years.

There are 145 Air Force ROTC Detachments nationwide. Each detachment is hosted by a fully accredited university and staffed by a group of Air Force Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) referred to as “cadre”. I am a cadre member at Detachment 620, hosted by Bowling Green State University. The detachment allows cadre to plan, oversee, and execute officer candidate (cadet) training from a face-to-face perspective. Detachment cadre also serve as university guest faculty in the role of Professor and Assistant Professors of Aerospace Studies. Cadre members have the privilege of providing mentorship and instruction to cadets throughout their four-year undergraduate programs. This daily oversight gives the detachment cadre a critical insight into the challenges of diversity and inclusion for individual cadets.

The effects of diversity and inclusion on the structure and demography of the Air Force is a narrative much larger and more complicated than any one Detachment can resolve alone. It will be the sum of all those efforts that drives organizational change. To refer to the fable, we will need to rebuild parts of our house. There is an argument to be made that focusing development efforts “on a micro-level can often lead to a failure to recognize much wider structures of disadvantage or oppression”(Willis 115). While I would not disagree with the statement, I find the opposite to be the more pressing concern. Organizations that focus on a macro level can often

fail to recognize a much narrower structure of disadvantage or oppression. What good is the full weight of civil society or bureaucratic intent if we forget that our neighbors are individuals that need individual attention? To develop towards structures that will impact the lives of a diverse set of officer candidates, it will be necessary to train ourselves to affect change at the detachment/unit level.

## **Challenges**

Air Force ROTC's mission is to develop leaders of character for tomorrow's Air Force and Space Force. That mission endures regardless of a cadet's aptitude or ability to meet the accepted mental and physical standards of the Air Force. Ultimately, the Air Force needs to maintain a cohort of officers to support worldwide mission requirements. Those officers manage multi-million-dollar aircraft, develop significant defense contracts, strategize plans for conducting warfare, act as diplomats in foreign nations, and most importantly, care for the lives of the personnel entrusted to them. The challenge to the ROTC environment is to develop those capable leaders out of a diverse group of individuals. Sometimes this means some cadets fall short of standards and cannot be appointed to carry out these responsibilities. It is essential to point out that many challenges work against student success in the ROTC environment. Not all factors are based on the inability of a student to apply hard work and effort towards succeeding.

The first significant challenge in the broader ROTC context is geographic in nature. Geographic diversity is inherent to the ROTC mission as an organization that trains and educates students from over 1,100 supported universities. These supported universities teach students from diverse and complex backgrounds with varied undergraduate degree program offerings. Within an Air Force training context, the ability to adapt to local cultural contexts and integrate Air Force values plays a critical role in contributing to more excellent success rates for minority

and female candidates. These varied environments are characterized by differing community strengths, ranges of population demographics, and local historical contexts. Additionally, outside of the core 145 AFROTC detachments, supported university cadets contend with long commutes to the host university and social isolation from the detachment atmosphere. This challenge exists for cadets that we refer to as “cross-towns,” regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Timing and needs of the Air Force are also significant challenges to promoting overall cadet success in gaining a commission. The needs of the Air Force dictate how many officers we can award with a commission each year. The success rates of officer candidates can range widely based on congressional requirements for officer manning across our force. In the 2021 selection year, the Air Force was unable to award as many allocations as previous years due to the number of officers occupying manning billets during the Covid-19 pandemic. Timing gets its say in terms of student success, and unfortunately, bad timing can filter out talented and capable officer candidates.

Another consideration is the lack of long-term mentorship from ROTC staff. Cadre officers instruct classes, labs, ROTC extracurricular activities, provide support during significant life events, and mentor students as they pursue academic and Air Force career goals. Cadre members serve as mentors to students throughout their time in the ROTC program. One limitation of this mentorship is that cadre members are currently assigned to ROTC instructor billets as a special duty of only two years. The short timeline presents a significant challenge for cadets as they develop trust and reliance on their cadre, but after two years of their 4-year program, they must adapt to a new advisor. New cadre members arrive with unique personalities, perspectives, and expectations that students must adapt to meet. In addition to these factors, medical requirements, academic aptitude, physical fitness, personal character, and the ability to

meet ROTC scheduling requirements can all deter students from accomplishing their goal of earning an Air Force commission.

The examples above are only a few factors that affect overall student success in AFROTC, but there are additional challenges that directly affect our ability to assess female and ethnically diverse officers. The first highlights wider systemic issues in the United States. In terms of Air Force officer eligibility factors, “overall, whites and other race/ethnicities meet eligibility requirements at around three to four times the rate of African Americans and Hispanics” (Lim, Nelson, et al. xi). These eligibility requirements are based on age, U.S. citizenship, an undergraduate degree, ability to meet the Air Force physical fitness standards, ability to meet Air Force medical standards, and meeting the demands of an officer accessions program like ROTC. Interestingly, based on academic standards, the eligibility of females in the U.S. is likely to be higher than males; however, “Youth surveys show that men prefer military service at much higher rates than women: For every woman interested in joining the military, there are almost three men interested” (Lim, Nelson, et al. xi).

Our detachment at Bowling Green State University saw enrollment shrink early in the Spring semester of 2022. I walked into the Field House just before zero six-thirty to the cadet squadron standing in perfect formation as expected, preparing to start their Monday physical training routine. The cadets shared the track room with Army ROTC cadets, running lap after lap to condition themselves for their fitness assessments later in the semester. I started my laps around the track, breathing in the dry air and trying my best not to look exhausted in front of my cadets. “Git after it,” shouted a cadet passing by. It was an Army ROTC cadet encouraging Cadet Essence Tindal to pick up the pace on her long run. Cadet Tindal was previously an Air Force ROTC cadet but received the news the week prior that she did not meet the minimum required

scores to pass the Air Force Officer Qualifying Test (AFOQT). Essence took her tenacity, ability, and willingness to serve her country to the cadre of the Army ROTC program, and they promptly offered her a chance to compete for an Army officer commission.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Cadet Tindal the previous semester for an interview. She had just failed her first attempt of the Air Force Officers Qualifying Test. “I went to school in Baltimore, in one of the worst school districts in America. We never did standardized testing prep,” she said. By all other measures, Cadet Tindal appeared more than capable of handling the challenges of life as an Air Force Officer. I noted that she had routinely displayed social maturity. Cadet Tindall thrives in a community where she is a black female minority, and the challenges of daily life are not always apparent to her peers. I recall her excitement at finally finding a salon within an hour’s drive that understood how to style and treat her hair. Cadet Tindal’s academic obstacles stemmed from a lack of opportunity in her early education. Our cadre team provided a tutoring resource on campus to coach Cadet Tindal on standardized testing, but the efforts proved too little too late.

These challenges exist across the U.S., where less than 72 million people meet the Air Force’s initial eligibility requirements, further reduced by medical and academic factors that leave the eligible portion of the U.S. population at “7.8 million individuals” (Lim, Nelson, et al. 9). Cadet Tindal is tenacious, and I am confident that I will see her succeed in serving her country as an Army officer. Still, she shares struggles with a larger cohort of individuals that did not benefit from education funding and investment in their formative years. In addition to the myriad of challenges that the average student faces becoming an Air Force officer, her obstacles were even more numerous.

While full consideration is warranted for broader systemic challenges that place our female and ethnic minority candidates at disadvantages, this paper focuses on the challenges that ROTC units have as a result. Social factors are intensely significant in this context. I had the privilege of an honest and open conversation with one of our detachment cadre, Technical Sergeant (TSgt) Christopher Farley, where we discussed the significance of identity.

TSgt Farley is a disciplined fitness buff. He wakes up religiously at zero four hundred hours to work out in a nearby gym and prepare for the workday. He earned an undergraduate degree during the first few years of his enlistment and has considered testing to qualify for training as an officer. He agreed to sit down and relate his experiences as a black man in a predominantly white Air Force. He described many of his working atmospheres the same way, like “walking on eggshells, trying not to be too black.” “We talk about the need for diversity, but you don’t see it. I know that for me in particular, I don’t see many officers that look like me, who are black, and it doesn’t give me a lot of hope or motivation to where I can be an officer, and I’m sure I’m not the only one that feels that way”. TSgt Farley’s words brought a perspective on the mounting social challenges that exist for minorities, and specifically black officer candidates. A sense of belonging is a basic element in community. Is our house built to accommodate TSgt Farley if we cannot establish those building blocks for inclusion?

## **Fieldwork**

Leading into the summer of 2021, I chose to focus fieldwork on the effects of the Air Force Officer Qualifying Test (AFOQT) on ethnic and gender diversity of ROTC commissioned officers. The basis of this primarily qualitative study was influenced by a 2010 RAND Corporation Study, commissioned by the Department of Defense, that looked at the validity, fairness, bias present in the AFOQT. The AFOQT is a 5-hour aptitude test “used to select college

graduates for entry-level officer positions in the Air Force. It measures verbal and quantitative aptitudes for evaluating overall officer potential as well as specific aptitudes for evaluating applicant potential as a pilot or combat system operator” (RAND 1).

The study is a resource-rich data pull on demographic studies of the test and data from the 1980s. It concluded, “regardless of which alternatives are selected to supplement the AFOQT, it is worth noting again that aptitude measures should not be replaced with less-valid measures simply to improve diversity. To do so would be tantamount to sacrificing the quality of all selected officers. Minority and female officers, as well as white male officers, would be less likely to be successful on the job—producing a less effective Air Force in general” (RAND 49).

The fieldwork for this thesis was largely qualitative, focusing efforts on gathering perspectives from student officer candidates who are directly affected by academic barriers in the ROTC environment. Initial research questions focused on whether allowing the AFOQT to serve as an eliminating factor may filter out much-needed attributes to our force. The ROTC enterprise is fully aware that leadership is a more involved skill set than standardized tests can perceive. Fieldwork examined the individual factors that contributed to success on the test and in ROTC overall. My research methodology followed a typical purposeful sampling strategy. The Interview sampling centered on gleaning the thoughts of individuals in their unique contexts, representing what Patton refers to as "information-rich cases, those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Merriam and Tisdell 96).

In keeping with a purposeful approach, research shifted from a focus on the AFOQT towards a broader identification of the most prevalent barriers to overall cadet success. This shift in research focus followed several interviews where individuals cited the social and physical

barriers that had substantial impacts on their success in ROTC. I began to ask the question directly, “what is the biggest obstacle to your success in ROTC?” Qualitative inquiries revealed challenges that spanned the spectrum of personal social challenges to wider educational disadvantages in years past, depending on the individual. Regarding selecting a sample context, Merriam and Tisdell identify the need for the researcher to “choose what, where, when, and whom to observe or interview” (96). While my sample size was limited to one ROTC detachment, the research is likely the first of its kind at the detachment level. I observed several serious challenges in the local ROTC environment that contributed directly to the attrition of several female and minority candidates. Purposeful sampling was an effective approach because the strategy “reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam and Tisdell 97). This form of qualitative research became crucial to my understanding of the subject of barriers to officer accessions among minority and female officer candidates. Qualitative research is unique because it focuses on the felt experience and highlights how we interact and connect. Brene Brown puts it succinctly, saying, “the ability to feel connected is why we’re here” (Power of Vulnerability 3:38). Fieldwork began a process of revealing a broader theme of connectivity and belonging that are integral to cadet success.

I was fortunate to practice copowerment throughout this process, working with our detachment staff and cadet leaders to discuss and explore topics as they arose. In the Spring semester of 2022, cadets discussed the types of unit trends and issues that they may be able to identify in a climate survey. I advised the cadet leadership team as they created an anonymous survey that garnered 55 respondents from the unit. Among other questions, the survey asked respondents for essay style feedback on the following:

- How committed is the leadership team to creating an environment of respect and dignity?



- What are three things you would change/improve in the detachment to improve climate?
- Do you feel a strong sense of belonging to Detachment 620?
- What do you see as the most significant challenge you are currently facing in the detachment?
- Has there been an instance of discrimination of any form (sex, race, religion, etc.)?

Without any prompting, our cadet staff incorporated the question about feeling a sense of belonging. I felt proud that they would consider “belonging” a noteworthy benchmark within a healthy detachment climate. I felt a personal connection to those results as well but thought it was important to keep in mind that “different environments produce discernable differences, not only across but within societies, in talent, temperament, human relations, and particularly in the ways that each culture and subculture brings up the next generation” (Bronfenbrenner 41). I anticipated a variety of perceptions before I evaluated the results of the survey, and it was no surprise that cadets held a diverse set of opinions and perspectives.

## **Ethics**

While operating as a representative of the Air Force, I recognize the benefit to my personal advancement through accomplishing my degree. There were several ethical considerations involved in the thesis project and paper. First, I remained aware that I should not use rank and authority to coerce individuals into participating in this study. Each cadet who participated in qualitative research interviews was presented with the opportunity to remain anonymous. Through the fieldwork and research process, I recognized the risk that cadets would perceive my requests to participate in the study as an order to do so. I took care to inform cadets that their participation in the study was not compulsory but rather an opportunity to share their perspectives. I was encouraged to see that interviews took the form of discussions, calling to

mind Dwight Conquergood's research with the Hmong people, where his interactions resulted in "a productive and mutually invigorating dialog, with neither side dominating or winning out" (Fadiman 37). Department of Defense (DoD) 5500.07-R, Joint Ethics Regulation (JER) outlines ethical parameters for DoD personnel within military contexts. The regulation includes guidance on acceptable and unacceptable exchanges of gifts, ethical use of government resources, and proper approval processes for activities outside and within DoD responsibilities. The stakes are high for me in this research context in keeping with DoD regulations, as I am subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice and could face severe judicial or non-judicial punishment for violating set military standards.

In addition to adhering to the JER, the AFROTC ethics structures mandate my acknowledgment of prohibited activities in all matters relating to training cadets. I have a documented acknowledgement from myself and each cadet that we will not participate in any unauthorized activities or personal relationships. These acknowledgments are outlined in the Department of Defense Form 2982/2983, a required item for all trainers and trainees. One key acknowledgement following qualitative research was that the issue of inclusion in a military setting for my students is a deeply personal and sometimes difficult to share with a small audience, let alone a larger group of readers. Due to the sensitive personal nature of some of the qualitative research findings, cadets were offered access to interview transcripts and able to omit statements at any time before the final paper submission.

## **Existing Research**

Research in the arena of racial and gender studies in the military is pervasive. The subject received attention to some degree from nearly every presidential administration since Truman in

the late 1940s, to include a reinvigorated depth under the Obama administration in 2011 with Executive Order 13583. The order intended to “establish a coordinated government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the federal workforce” (EO13583). This order inherently extended to our military services. According to an analysis of this strategic initiative, the order intended to advance beyond affirmative action hiring processes to provide tools to “leverage our unique identities and differences in the name of building high-performance teams, inclusive cultures, and providing fantastic public service” (Borry). Strategic diversity and inclusion initiatives are only a starting point in setting the tone for individual government service organizations to address their unique cultures and climates. The military culture receives a wide range of assessments about diversity and inclusion. Broader issues like those discussed by Burk and Espinoza focus on a sociological approach to race and gender relations across the Department of Defense to include issues for officers like promotion rates and administration of military justice. Still, there are a host of other studies in recent years that are specific to Air Force initiatives.

In response to a revived focus on diversity and inclusion, the Report of Inquiry (S8918P) Independent Racial Disparity Review was published by the Air Force Inspector General (IG) Office as an independent review in December 2020. In the wake of rising racial tensions in the U.S., the IG conducted an Air Force-wide study to “assess racial disparity in military discipline processes and personnel development and career opportunity as they pertain to black Airmen and Space Professionals” (IG Report 1). The study was extensive in scope; however, it did not explore issues within Air Force Officer accessions in any depth. The publication highlights areas of Air Force attention to the topic of racial disparity. Clearly, the existence of so much effort and

literature underscores an active conversation within the Department of the Air Force. Yet, previous publications have not focused on issues specific to the Air Force ROTC environment.

All the quantitative data I collected pertaining to rates of minority and female officer accessions data is presented each fiscal year by Air Force ROTC headquarters through the Professional Officer Course Selection Process (PSP) Board results. During the 2021 academic year, the selection of officer candidates was 30.6% female and 69.4%, male. Caucasian categories comprised 67% of PSP-selected candidates, while the remaining 33% were divided between several minority groups. It is worth noting that only 11% of these candidates were African American, coming close to reflecting a representational proportion to the U.S. 14% African American population. This 3% gap may seem a small amount to overcome, but strategic initiatives have not produced much growth in minority and female officer accessions in recent years. Additionally, there are career nuances for female and minority officers who are less likely to compete for jobs as pilots and struggle to achieve promotions on pace with their white male counterparts. One of the most prominent examples of this trend shows that “black officers are overrepresented in the acquisition, support, medical, and logistics/maintenance fields and are underrepresented in the operations Air Force Specialty Codes (career fields). . . The disparity of black officers in the pilot career field could be a factor that translates to fewer promotion and career development opportunities” (IG Report 38).

## **Research Findings and Recommendations**

Through research and fieldwork, it became clear that the job of developing minority and female officers that would break historical norms is not likely to happen through strategic initiatives, IG inquiries, broad sociological studies, or even larger recruiting efforts at the ROTC

Headquarters level. Perhaps we could bolster those elements to a great extent if we were more intentionally contextualized in our ROTC environment to tackle social, physical, and academic obstacles from the start. There is no better place to observe ROTC's cultural practices than its outermost layer, "the visible part of cultures"(Hofstede 19). My text research met fieldwork at the detachment level where qualitative interviews and climate surveys uncovered several broad themes within the local context relating to Air Force physical and academic standards and social concerns. These factors were seemingly exaggerated for the minority and female candidates who shared their thoughts in formal interviews. The following considerations reflect the core findings of my research. I assert that ROTC units nationwide should consider the part these items play in influencing minority and female cadet success in our units.

### **Academic Considerations**

First, academic underperformance is one of the most common factors in attrition among student officer candidates. Based on the known geographic diversity within the ROTC architecture, I anticipated the broad differences in academic performance that would likely be present for students nationwide. It should not surprise anyone that cadets from Detachment 365 at MIT are more likely to bring up national averages for mathematic performance than cadets at Bowling Green State University in Ohio (known for its business and education programs). However, fieldwork uncovered a vast difference in students' academic aptitudes within the local detachment context based partly on the effects of educational upbringing, standardized test preparation, individual aptitude, and individual effort. Cadet Anna Miller was a high-performing student at her high school. "I took all the AP classes," she said. "when I got to college, academics was not the problem necessarily. My high school prepared me" (personal interview 30

Aug). Yet Cadet Miller failed to meet minimum standards for several components on the AFOQT during her first attempt.

Our staff recognized, based on her previous academic history, that the difficulty of the test was not the most likely reason for Cadet Miller's failure. She worked with a tutor at the university over the following months on testing timing. Her work paid off, passing the AFOQT by a wide margin on her second attempt. This case was an encouraging one but seemed to be one of the outliers in terms of pass rates for female and minority candidates. Naturally, our cadre staff explored practical resources such as tutoring, recommending Air Force-approved test preparation, and supporting a cadet led academic engagement initiative. Cadets in the detachment setting are identified as "at-risk" for potential academic struggle based on previous standardized test scores and High School grade point average. After passing her AFOQT, Cadet Miller was keen to help others that may face the same obstacles that she did. She felt empowered to create a survey that queried students on their primary academic weaknesses and automatically recommended resources based on their answers. While the initiative was a promising way to promote effective study strategies, the following rounds of the AFOQT still yielded three failures, all within minority and female categories.

Following fieldwork, it was difficult to digest the fact that more effort and initiatives to aid our students did not produce a discernable result. Our staff and cadet leadership team were left to assess the potential reasons why students continued to fail. One of the most cited reasons from individual discussions outside of formal interviews involved a lack of standardized test preparation for minority students in their formative years. This argument was a very common understanding of the problem. It seemed logical to say that faults and funding within the U.S. education system were a likely reason that our minority and female students were unprepared to

compete academically. Additionally, there is strong evidence to suggest that child development plays a large role in developing academic and emotional aptitudes where “chronically elevated stress in infancy affects the developing brain by damaging neurons in the areas involved in emotions and learning” (World Bank 101). I say with certainty that the core of the issue does not rest with the U.S. Air Force, yet, we are left to ask how we could mitigate those effects to bring in the diverse talent that the Air Force needs?

In a study examining trends in standardized testing for White, Black, and Hispanic students from 1996 to 2003, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton explored the psychological factors affecting the level of achievement on standardized tests among minority groups. The focal point of the research was on social constructs that may exacerbate stereotypes and threats to self-identity. I noted a fascinating standardized testing experiment within the study that cited the following. “In one condition (the “ability diagnostic” condition), the students were told that the researchers were interested in verbal ability and that the test contained items that were diagnostic of this ability. In the other condition (the “non-diagnostic” condition), the task was framed differently: the students were told that questions would help researchers understand how people solve problems and that the researchers were not interested in evaluating the participants’ ability” (11). The results revealed a significantly higher level of performance for African American students, commensurate with their white peers when the experiment suggested that the test was non-diagnostic. A related experiment highlighted similar effects with gender. “Their experimental manipulation involved telling men and women in the diagnostic condition that the test they were about to take revealed gender differences, thus directly bringing to bear a specific social identity (gender) to the test. In the other condition, the men and women were told that the questions revealed no gender difference” (Mendoza-Denton 11). Incredibly, “the gender

differences led women to underperform academically, whereas the scores of men and women were statistically indistinguishable in the gender-neutral condition” (12). Both studies suggested a strong correlation between emphasis on social identity and academic performance.

The nature of the AFOQT is diagnostic and may remain that way to identify the ability of officer candidates to compete in an Air Force training environment. However, research made it increasingly clear that detachment leadership may be able to make critical differences in academic performance through resource preparation combined with proper framing of the test. It is important that local level detachment leaders do not disempower themselves to affect the problem of standardized testing gaps by writing the problem off as a macro-educational issue. Cadre are mentors and leaders to each student that steps through their doors, and that responsibility can mean a tailored approach for at-risk students. The broader enterprise understands that there are factors beyond academic performance that we must capture. One of those initiatives involves recent work to create a Situational Judgement Test (SJT) to help our organization understand how our incoming officers solve problems. This initiative is in its infancy but has powerful potential. If the ROTC enterprise pushes for the SJT to become a portion of the AFOQT, then it would shift the emphasis of testing away from the participants’ ability and onto their ability to make morally and ethically sound judgments. This type of reframing would be invaluable in helping detachment staff reframe the AFOQT and potentially see a smaller testing gap.

### **Fitness Considerations**

Physical fitness standards were a topic of discussion in every female interview but one. The Air Force recently revised fitness standards for Active-Duty personnel, outlining no specific body fat percentage requirement. The change allows Active-Duty members the opportunity to



pass their fitness tests without further scrutiny on their body fat percentage or waist circumference. However, a body fat measurement is still a requirement for candidates seeking entry into the Air Force. The typical interview discussions noted a difficulty for women of specific body types to meet height and weight standards. In one case, a female cadet passed her fitness test with an excellent score but did not meet the assigned “body fat percentage of 28% or less” (AFROTCI 36-2011). In that case, the cadet must come within weight standards or face dismissal from ROTC. It is worth noting that the collegiate environment can be a difficult place to succeed in maintaining a healthy diet, where cadets are confined to the dormitory spaces and rely on food options from university dining facilities. Cadets face other challenges as well due to economic constraints. While some have access to vehicles and maintain part-time jobs, others do not have transportation options and choose not to pursue employment. These options can be critical for females at risk of failing body fat measurements due in part to their body type.

Learning a disciplined regimen of diet and exercise is a common denominator for any student pursuing a commission to the Air Force, and those elements are left to the effort level of individual cadets. However, there may be unacknowledged bias within the Air Force system for determining Body Mass Index (BMI) and body fat percentage. While much of a cadet’s fitness is determined by individual efforts, genetics undoubtedly have their say. Air Force Manual 36-2905 outlines the fitness standards and scoring for males and females, broken into age categories. The regulation gives guidance for fitness test administration and includes instructions for a one size fits all approach to measuring cadets to determine a body fat percentage. Among other studies, research conducted by Heymsfield, S B et al. found “for any value of BMI, there are differences in percentage body fat (% fat) between subjects of the same sex across race and ethnic groups” (5). These potential differences are a significant source of discussion for those cadets who clearly

meet fitness standards but struggle to meet the required minimums for body fat percentage.

Currently, there is not a commonly accepted waiver available for those students. Theoretically, a cadet could have a perfect grade point average, excellent leadership aptitude, and a perfect score on their fitness test, but still, be disenrolled from ROTC if they do not meet the body fat standard.

Further elements exasperate obstacles to female fitness in the form of peer expectations. Gert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory offers a framework for considering broader themes of masculinity in American culture. Americans tend towards more masculine behavior overall, indicating "that the society will be driven by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the winner or best-in-the-field" (Hofstede Insights). Even in a local context, a detachment will battle long-held military archetypes that paint the military as a "gateway for attaining the fullest version of masculinity for young men" (Ulbrich and Wintermute 362). There are clear gaps between average male and female physical achievement at the detachment level and acknowledged in our Air Force publications by differing standards for men and women. This competitive environment presents inherent obstacles to female cadets who still contend with their male peers with a masculine cultural ideology.

Understanding the myriad of physical nuances in the ROTC environment required a tailored approach. To tackle those obstacles, Detachment 620 partnered with the Exercise Science Department at the university, providing office space for two graduate students that advise on specific cadet fitness regimens, and dedicate their internships to studying the physical fitness environment. The graduate students advise cadet staff on fitness challenges, performance dynamics, and even some sports psychology to promote an environment of increased knowledge and accountability. Cadet leadership also recognized that they had a large part to play in unit

success. Cadets established an informal initiative to promote the use of the student recreational facility outside of prescribed ROTC physical training hours. The cultural shift is impactful, seeing the average composite score for the Fitness Assessment move from a score of 85.1 to 92.9 and from a 76.6% pass rate to a 100% pass rate. Most notably, the detachment has not lost a single female cadet due to failed fitness standards since the program began in Fall of 2020.

### **Social Considerations**

At the root of the social concerns was a sense that there were many unacknowledged barriers to belonging in ROTC. First, the lack of minority and female representation was a felt barrier to fitting into the local context. I refer to Sergeant Farley's comments about not seeing many others that he could look to and aspire to be within the Air Force Officer Corps. The same theme exists for our minority and female candidates at the detachment level across the nation. The instructors that we place in ROTC instructor billets do not always represent the full spectrum of our racial and gender diversity as a force. Therefore, the officer role models that our students interact with every day are predominantly white men. This is not an assertion that we should reduce the number of white men in our organization since all instructors are highly vetted and able to share a diverse and welcome perspective to students in detachments across the nation. However, the conversation brought a necessity to explore how local detachments could promote this sense of belonging in a realistic way.

The results of a local anonymous climate survey in the Spring Semester of 2022 confirmed a sense of quasi-family belonging felt by most members at the detachment level. Although a small number of respondents cited that they did not feel they fit in with their peers, the immediate response to the survey was a positive reflection on the majority view. I was able to discuss the results of the survey with our cadet staff in a way that helped shed light on some

overlooked areas. Climate surveys are a useful tool for determining general feelings and short-term leanings in a sub-culture, but interpretations are vulnerable to a kind of survivorship bias. The small percentage of student respondents to our survey that did not feel a sense of belonging could have easily become a footnote, but the cadet staff made them the focal point of their discussions. I posed the question, why do these students feel socially isolated?

To find some possible answers, I explored the idea that power dynamics were influencing our student population to a greater extent than we acknowledge. After all, a military command structure carries connotations of control, not compassion/empathy. In discussing her theory of development, Katie Willis explores a dimension of power called "power with," that "comes from individuals working together to achieve common goals" (113). This mentality sounds like the ideal state for military environments. A leader or a leadership team that can empower their personnel to accomplish mission outcomes and objectives is a proven methodology of successful leaders. In the ROTC environment, cadets are appointed with "power over" peers and first- and second-year students through a traditional military hierarchical command structure. The great learning outcome within the ROTC detachment is to develop tools to balance command (power over) with empowerment (power with) to accomplish an assigned mission. Dwight D. Eisenhower summarized these concepts well, saying, "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it" (Forbes).

I was an onlooker to what could only be described as a crisis of belonging when I spoke with a cadet about his decreased performance in the ROTC program in the Fall of 2021. The conversation quickly turned to a discussion about mental health and social media addiction. The young man was placing the weight of the world on his shoulders and commented about a lack of social interaction with classmates. He cited feeling isolated and alone as a national backdrop of

racial discrimination seemed out of control. His loneliness was compounded by the fact that he had very few cadets that shared his experience as a black man in Northwest Ohio. Unfortunately, he did not feel as if he belonged in the local organization, and his behavior resulted in missed deadlines that affected his classmates and damaged his credibility with first- and second-year students. He did not feel that anyone would care to listen, and even if they listened, they might not understand, and if they understood, what could they do about his issues anyways?

Why is belonging so crucial to our cadet's success? The ability of a small organization to pursue a common and collective goal is a form of empowerment that forms the basis for the success of the parts. Simply put, cadets that do not find a sense of belonging may be less likely to succeed than their peers, and the organization will suffer as long as that cadet stays without a sense of belonging. Charles Vogl points out that many groups face similar issues of belonging. He says, "in many groups, particularly highly selective elite ones, many members become convinced that they don't belong"(46). Belonging provides stability for our organizations, and the people who make it up. "When people are disconnected from the workplace, they often disconnect from other social institutions as well" (Laboissiere and Morshed).

There are compounded factors of belonging for minority groups that contribute heavily to our organization's ability to gain positive results from demographic diversity. Research by Harvard Business School's Amy Edmondson suggests that while diversity is often touted as a force multiplier, under the wrong conditions, diversity could hinder team performance. Edmondson suggests that an organization needs to combine a positive climate for diversity and psychological safety in order to see increased team performance. She suggests "that psychological safety may be playing an especially crucial role for minorities in creating engagement and a feeling of being valued at work" (45). Achievement of that psychological

safety is hard-won. It requires care and attention on an individual level but is ultimately an extremely worthwhile endeavor. Social health, growth, and development happen at the detachment level. The ROTC Cultural Field Guide that I created gives new cadre members an introduction to the types of challenges they will likely face in promoting social success for their cadets. It will also help them consider the nuanced challenges in their units for minority and female students.

## **Application**

Based on research and fieldwork, the attached guide (attachment 1) provides a logical basis for addressing academic, physical, and social challenges within the ROTC environment. Additionally, the guide offers practical ways to begin addressing common challenges. While this thesis intends to highlight ethnic and gender disparity, the application of the concepts presented in the attached guide is intended to offer inclusive options for overall cadet success.

To apply this thesis to an overall understanding within a particular ROTC context, there are two primary tools that every detachment should employ to promote academic, physical, and social wellbeing. The first is listening, “we may ask questions, or may just listen. But unless we listen closely, we’ll never understand others from their perspectives. We need to know what it’s like for that person in this place” (Sunstein and Cheseri-Strater 219). At 23, I just started my career in the Air Force, long before the days of instructing ROTC. I was a young Lieutenant and apprehensive about being in command of Airmen my age and older. I had the privilege to supervise an Airman named Brian. I remember a Captain sitting down with me at the time and telling me about Brian’s low potential. Brian grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. He dropped out of The Ohio State University after one semester and joined the Air Force. He saw the military as a last resort. I recall sitting down with Brian and asking what he wanted out of the Air Force. I was

able to listen. He wanted to succeed. As a young black man, he wanted to break through stereotypes. He wanted to be excellent at his job and to be recognized for it. Carol Dweck's perspective reminded me of Brian. She said, "a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training" (Kelley and Kelley 30). Brian went on to be my most exceptional Airman and continues a record of performance to this day, recently passing the AFOQT to compete for a spot in Officer Training School.

The second tool is empathy, or humanity as Petra Kuenkel puts it. She recounts, "there is one thing I have observed across all cultures, nations, and organizations I have worked in: when people see the story behind a tense situation or difficult-to-understand behavior, when they see the humanness in another person, they develop compassion that often leads to revolutionary change" (64). Practicing empathy may mean having uncomfortable conversations. Talking about issues of race can be uncomfortable for some. Sometimes there is a temptation to avoid the topic altogether because often, "our attempts to fix the problems of this world further reveal the depths of our brokenness" (Katongole and Rice 23). These are messy topics that I cannot claim to fully understand. However, using the great tool of collective humanity can help us relate with one another through "the common human experience" (Katongole and Rice 25), which can provide common ground, even when we realize our worlds look very different from each other's. These critical conversations also provide previously untapped avenues for belonging. Increased social "contact can, and does, work through both cognitive, behavioral, and affective means (Katongole and Rice 25)." There is a notion that contact reduces negative emotion that is not only true, but I also assert that the opportunity for increased empathy through conversation builds strong bonds and a stronger sub-culture, leading to a greater sense of community and belonging.

## Conclusion

This research acknowledges that not all people who compete to become officers are meant to be so. Palmer points this out saying, “our created natures make us like organisms in an ecosystem: there are some roles and relationships in which we thrive and others in which we wither and die” (44). Attracting talent is a big part of our discussion as an Air Force officer accessions source. We focus on recruiting in order to attract capable candidates with diverse perspectives. I found a great parallel between the challenges of social entrepreneurship and military recruiting. While the Air Force offers competitive compensation to many talented candidates, there is also a heavier burden placed on officers in the profession of arms than in the civilian leadership sector. David Bornstein and Susan Davis suggest that “successful social entrepreneurs go to great lengths to help people see how their abilities might be channeled to bring significant change” (57). There are many competing priorities to our mission of creating leaders of character for the Air and Space Forces, and it is paramount that we avoid “mission creep,” “the phenomenon of sending troops to do a job and then failing to notice as they slowly but surely get sidetracked” (Lynch and Walls 146). This is a concept that I think can easily distract from gaining ground on solutions to social, physical, and academic problems that plague our cadets. Specifically, mission creep in the form of administrative tasks, additional duties, and university bureaucracy can distract us from the types of nuanced issues that our minority and female cadets may face.

Additionally, just seeing a more diverse environment is an encouraging sign of change, but it does not constitute a second-order change in attitudes towards racial diversity. Second-order change involves challenging accepted paradigms within an organization. “If reconciliation and intercultural integrity are to be both achieved and sustained, then policies, procedures,



structures, and systems must go beyond adding numerical diversity” (Salter McNeil 89). Real change in our racial disparity will come as a result of listening, practicing empathy, and enacting practices that build a house that is fit for many types.

In line with this concept, I recalled a story that the former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Dave Goldfein shared. I believe it summarizes the shifting attitude within the facets of the Air Force that I have served in as well. Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Wright served with General Goldfein and began one day in the General’s office with a box of Band-Aids marked “flesh-colored Band-Aids.” The Chief remarked, “Sir, take a look at this; it should make you mad. It makes a lot of your Airmen mad”. It took some coaching to get the General to the point where he realized the issue. Anyone whose skin was not white would never match the tone of the Band-Aid. It was a simple but poignant example. Our shared mission in the Air Force to “Fly, fight, and win. We do so as a team of teams. Our core values of integrity, service, and excellence are a common expectation of all our Airmen who carry out that mission. It dawned on General Goldfein that day that expectations of shared values did little to change our failure to facilitate inclusive structures. “The first thing we do as leaders is acknowledge we all have blinders on,” he said. “And there are certain things we are not going to be able to see in our organization. Once we acknowledge that, we have to acknowledge there are flesh-colored Band-Aids in every squadron” (Pope). I believe structures will change as we share our visions for inclusivity within diverse environments and willingly change our behavior to meet new expectations. Like the story of a house built for a giraffe, there are tangible efforts, critical conversations, and visible barriers that we need to address if we want our house to accommodate everyone.

Finally, the pursuit of military service may seem like an opposing theme to the principles of community development. Community development looks at the heart of existing realities and empowers communities to see the best in themselves and their potential. Community development is cooperative and collaborative and focuses on a deep understanding of cultural contexts. Traditional views of military service in the United States are favorable, but the key reality in military service is that the profession is one of violence. Air Force officers receive commissions to manage that violence. As Douglas MacArthur said, “the soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war. Military service carries a solemn toll for those who experience it. That reality is exactly why community development is so important within the ROTC context. As we mentor and direct the military leaders of tomorrow with a focus on promoting diversity of thought, intelligence, ability, and strengths, it is with an enduring hope for peace. It is vital that future leaders understand existing realities, cultural contexts, and the potential for collaboration in the interest of peace and security. Diverse perspectives will be key elements in keeping our force from the narrow mindsets that lead to unnecessary conflicts and will be the key to propelling us towards a future of mutual prosperity. The pursuit of military service is not in opposition to the principles of community development, but a proving ground for development’s most enduring competencies.

## **Appendices**

Attachment 1- Building a Culture of Inclusion: An Air Force ROTC Detachment Field Guide

Attachment 1

# *Building a Culture of Inclusion*

## *An Air Force ROTC Detachment Field Guide*

Captain Matthew D. Fagan, USAF

Pending Headquarters Air Force ROTC Approval



This thesis project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in International Community Development.

**Author's Note:** This document generates material written from different MAICD Program courses: Culture Studies in the Global Context, Community Development, Research for Social Change, Social Entrepreneurship and Design Thinking and Fieldwork.



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# Section 1- ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is a resource for cadre members assigned to geographically separated Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) detachments. One of the many challenges we face as an organization is building a culture of diversity and inclusion. This guide recognizes unique challenges in all 145 Air Force ROTC Detachments across the continental United States and beyond.

The recommendations here will help you understand the cultural dimensions of your assigned location and recognize the skills necessary for building a culture of inclusion.



Photo Credit to: Cadet Lillian Friesinger

## Project Background

The United States Air Force (USAF) is a highly selective organization with a rigorous process for acceptance into its leadership ranks. The spectrum of requirements to be assessed into the Air Force Officer Corps covers aspects from physical and academic to emotional and social skills needed to lead men and women in complex warfare environments. The Air Force recognizes the need for a diverse perspective from its officers to meet the enduring demand for the care of Airmen who accomplish their mission. Air Force Instruction 36-7001 broadly defines diversity as:

***“A composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force Mission. Air Force diversity includes but is not limited to: personal life experiences, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural knowledge, educational background, work experience, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical and spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity, and gender” (3).***

Building on this understanding, the Air Force is still working to produce more female officers and officers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. According to data from the 2021 Professional Officer Corps Selection Process Board provided by Air Force ROTC Headquarters, female officer

candidates made up only 32% of the officers selected for commissioning. Additionally, African American, Asian, and Hispanic candidates represented only 33% of selected candidates. While the number of ethnic minority candidates is edging closer to a number that looks like the U.S. national demography, the Air Force is actively identifying the underlying cultural issues present in our ranks. So, the USAF must balance the need for a diverse officer corps with its high academic and physical standards. Therefore, this guide exists to provide a starting point for incoming ROTC cadre to encourage diverse candidates to meet and overcome these standards.

This guide is informed by fieldwork conducted throughout the AFROTC Northeast Region, Sub-region 2. Fieldwork explored persistent obstacles for ethnic minority and female officer candidates in the ROTC environment. The resulting conclusion was that regardless of the high potential for many individuals to gain a commission, there were many unacknowledged obstacles in the way. This guide acknowledges pitfalls affecting diversity and inclusion in ROTC to include the Air Force Officer's Qualifying Test, which according to a RAND Corporation study, consistently saw a higher rate of passing scores from white males than minority and female test-takers. Additionally, the guide acknowledges broader contexts in the United States that favor masculinity in military service and affect our female candidates in visible and invisible ways. Social factors inherently and systemically integrated into our U.S. and Air Force culture are acknowledged contributors to the isolation of our minority Airmen. Even how the Air Force has historically outlined standards for dress and appearance has created a less welcoming environment for minority Airmen.

Understanding what makes these students successful is a necessity if we are to create an environment where success is possible. In order to increase the success of female and ethnic

minority officer candidates across the enterprise, individual ROTC units must understand their local socio-ethnic and gender contexts and adopt practices for supporting appropriate social, academic, and physical resources that produce equity of opportunity. This guide aims to provide common structures and procedures that encourage student success in physical fitness, Air Force testing, collegiate academics, and social environments. The guide has the potential to provide officer instructors (known as cadre) with a myriad of ways to offer paths to success for student officer candidates (known as cadets) in their local contexts. Any cadre member can use the information here to build a more inclusive culture. Building an inclusive culture is an ongoing process that requires effort and maintenance every day.

## **Section 2 – UNDERSTANDING LOCAL CONTEXTS**

Geographic diversity is inherent to the ROTC mission as an organization that trains and educates at over 1,100 supported universities “to develop leaders of character for tomorrow's Air Force and Space Force” (afrotc.com). The Air Force ROTC curriculum teaches Cross-Cultural Competence (3C) as a necessity for military leaders operating in diverse contexts. The concept focuses on 12 separate yet tightly interwoven cultural domains (reference Figure 1.1). The domains give an overview of people’s tendencies to see the world in a certain way and form a starting point for

cadre members to consider the varied cultural aspects we encounter.



*“Diversity is part of our DNA. America's strength is even greater than the sum of its parts. Our best qualities as a nation shine through when we embrace different cultures, backgrounds, and ways of thinking.”*

*-General Darren McDew, former commander of the Air Force’s Air Mobility Command*

Within our Air Force training contexts, the ability to adapt to meet cultural contexts and integrate Air Force values into local environments and people will play a critical role in contributing to more excellent success rates for minority and female candidates. Importantly, local contexts create unique opportunities to seek out the strengths of each community in all 12 cultural domains and form strong partnerships that contribute to the success of officer candidates as students and future military officers. Understanding those community strengths begins with knowing your people,



familiarizing yourself with population demographics, and understanding the local historical context.

### **Knowing Your People**

Understanding the people you lead is a fundamental tenet of leadership. Knowing the cadets in your ROTC Detachment then is the first step to exploring the cultural context of your geographically separated unit (GSU). Much of our ability to measure the leadership potential of future Air Force Officers in ROTC relies on

statistical data (test scores, GPA, fitness scores, etc.). However, cadre members also need to focus on contextual factors that affect cadet performance. Getting to know your cadets' background and personal struggles will give insight into their level of emotional intelligence.



**Photo Credit to: Det 620 Public Affairs**

In a 2021 interview, Cadet Essence Tindal had just failed the Air Force Officers Qualifying Test. She stated, “I went to school in Baltimore, in one of the worst school districts in America. We never did standardized testing prep” (Personal Interview 30 Aug). By all other measures, Cadet Tindal appeared more than capable of handling the challenges of life as an Air Force Officer. Her academic obstacles stemmed from a lack of opportunity in her early education. Our cadre team provided a tutoring resource on campus to coach Cadet Tindal on standardized testing. Knowing your people means knowing the barriers that exist or have existed to their success.

At the heart of knowing your people is the concept that leaders who want to create thriving communities look for ways to serve the community's members. Charles Vogl, the author of *The Art of Community*, states, "communities function best and are most durable when they're helping members to be more successful in some way in a connected and dynamic world" (5). A primary way to lead the development of a healthy detachment culture of inclusion is to seek out ways to serve the needs of your people.

### **Population Demographics**

Have a working knowledge of the demographics in your area. Knowing your local area and university's ethnic, socio-economic, and gender makeup will inform your perspective on where you need to work to create a culture of inclusion. The development of culture thrives on a system of shared values. Our Air Force Core Values of "Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence In All We Do" hold our culture to a standard beyond our local context. However, cadre members must understand local contexts to identify what barriers may prevent cadets from adopting those values.

Cadet Gabriel Maxwell was hesitant to form friendships when he arrived at his local detachment. Only 7% of the students at his university were black, and Cadet Maxwell was the only black student in his ROTC class. The population surrounding the college was 98% white and did not offer many places where he felt that he fit in. In an interview, Cadet Maxwell commented that the idea of becoming an Air Force Officer and possibly a pilot was a dream, but that it was difficult to picture, stating, "I don't know any officers who look like me. I don't know any pilots that look like me either". Cadet Maxwell shares a similar struggle with the black Airmen who serve in our

Air Force today. The Air Force recognizes a lack of proportional representation of black officers compared to the U.S. population. In 2020, the Air Force Inspector General published an Independent Racial Disparity Review highlighting, among other issues, the fact that “enlisted black service members are overrepresented in accessions when compared to their proportion of the eligible U.S. population. Black service members are underrepresented in operational career fields and overrepresented in support career fields, which may affect their promotion opportunities” (Inspector General 4). Additionally, black officers and pilots are underrepresented. Cadre members are responsible for recognizing the need for inclusion of minority and female members, taking into account the barriers that exist to establishing a sense of belonging.

### **History**

Regarding university archives, Authors Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater point out that university archives “document the shared histories, academic lives, and memories of their institutions, as well as the specialties they represent and the cultures that surround them” (327). University Archives are full of rich history and can significantly contribute to pride, investment, and feelings of inclusion for students of diverse backgrounds. One example of ROTC history at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) was the formation of the Air Force ROTC Angel Flight. Collegiate women, officer candidates, formed a group of their own, first appearing at BGSU in 1962. The group's achievements were widespread and generally unknown by the female cadets of the detachment. Passing along the information was a small but effective investment in creating a feeling of inclusion for our female cadets.

## **Section 3 – CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

## Academic Engagement

Cadre members are responsible for promoting and supporting the academic success of student officer candidates. Academics remain the highest priority for any detachment across our enterprise. Therefore, establishing programs and consolidating resources from local and crosstown universities is necessary to aid struggling students with academic obstacles.

This academic engagement will occur after identifying which



Photo Credit to: Det 620 Public Affairs

students will likely struggle to meet standards, part of knowing your people. Air Force Officers are held to high standards in academic training environments, allowing them to take on the complex tasks entrusted to the Air Force. Air Force ROTC leadership acknowledges the challenge of balancing the priorities of high academic standards and ensuring the inclusion of a diverse group of officer candidates. Colonel Christopher Bennett commented in an interview, “this is a tough challenge. We need our officers to look like the nation, but we also need to make sure that we hold ourselves to a high standard. We need to prioritize recruiting talent from diverse backgrounds”.

There are at least two areas where academic success is necessary to create a successful officer candidate. Academic success depends on a passing AFOQT score and a competitive Grade Point Average. College campuses are rich resources for academic engagement but gathering those resources can be overwhelming. Additionally, it is vital for cadre members to understand the process, pitfalls, and barriers presented by the AFOQT.

**Gathering resources**

The way we gather and present resources should be informed by the domains of culture. These resources can be helpful for removing learning, financial, communication, technology, and spatial barriers for academic success. The following is a non-exhaustive list of campus resources to help you on your way to exploring options on your campus.

**Tutoring:** Some students need tutoring resources. As a cadre member, you can establish connections between students and tutoring services on campus. Aside from online options, encourage students to reach out to their academic advisors to connect with graduate assistants or teaching assistants that may offer tutoring sessions on behalf of the department.

**Financial Aid:** Finances constitute a large portion of the stress on the average college student. While Air Force scholarships are the primary resource that cadre members offer, they are only available to a small number of high-performing cadets. Cadre members need to recognize that economic stressors may increase depending on a cadet's socio-economic background. Consider whether a cadet may not be able to focus on academics or participate as readily in detachment events because they are working part or full time to pay their way.

**Communicating with Advisors:** Some academic advisors are victims of short staffing and may have too many students under their care to give appropriate

attention to academic planning. ROTC requires students to present an academic plan every semester, which can place an additional stressor on cadets who suffer from poor communication from their advisors. Cadre members should consider establishing contacts in those departments to increase the chance of advocating on the cadet's behalf.

**Library Databases and Online Resources:** Library and online academic resources are widely and easily available to cadets studying at major universities. Cadre members can support cadets in the technological domain by encouraging those resources as a normal practice. One way to establish that expectation is to designate a cadet as an academic officer responsible for compiling online study resources.

**Safe and Quiet Spaces:** Many detachments can offer cadet lounge spaces. These are areas where cadre members can encourage respect for quiet and calm to support cadets that need to get away from busy dorm or library spaces.

### **Understanding the AFOQT**

The Air Force Officer Qualifying Test (AFOQT) can be a formidable obstacle for cadets. To encourage diversity of talent and thought amongst Air Force Officers, ROTC detachments may offer robust pre-testing resources to student officer candidates before administering the AFOQT. In recent years, the Air Force has transitioned screening options

for flight programs and initial skills screening to training programs. Where screening programs once ushered personnel out of job sets based on inability to meet a required training timeline, training programs allow a more flexible training timeline meant to make way for more personnel to attain proficiency and move on from training. Similarly, the Air Force is creating opportunities for more students to succeed on the AFOQT. In 2021, the test regulation saw several changes, including the allowance of group study and reduced time between retakes. ROTC followed suit and began delegating authority for third-time test waivers to the region level.

These changes are a start to addressing a long-standing concern that the AFOQT is a less attainable standard for female and minority officer candidates. The AFOQT is a standard established in the 1950s, and passing the test remains a requirement for officers. The findings of a 2010 RAND Corporation study stated, “Despite its lack of bias, the AFOQT does have noticeable average race and gender differences. These differences result in a larger proportion of women and minorities rejected relative to white and male applicants, leading to a less diverse workforce” (Hardison 51). Identifying at-risk students and providing resources will increase success rates over time. The following are items for cadre members to consider in the preparation and administration of the AFOQT.

**Encourage Group Study:** Cadre members have access to a host of data points on cadet academic performance. Previous standardized test performance on the ACT and SAT are good indicators of potential testing areas for concern. Group study is authorized per AFI 36-2605 and may be conducted if all group members have not

taken the test before. Cadre members can encourage cadets who may be at risk to join a preexisting group study, leaving room for cadet initiative.

**Understand Focal Points for Study:** Cadet Anna Miller was a high-performing student at her high school. “I took all the AP classes,” she said. “when I got to college, academics was not the issue necessarily. My high school prepared me” (personal interview 30 Aug). Yet Cadet Miller failed to meet minimum standards for several components on the AFOQT during her first attempt. Cadre recognized, based on her previous academic history, that the difficulty of the test was not the most likely reason for Cadet Miller’s failure. She worked with a tutor at the university over the following months on testing timing. Her work paid off, passing the AFOQT by a wide margin on her second attempt. Cadre must give time and attention to the specific needs of each cadet to encourage their success. Identifying each student's key areas of need allows you to vector them to an appropriate resource. Cadet Miller went on to build a survey that helped cadets in the following semester identify areas of need for study and AFOQT preparation.

## **Social Engagement**



The Air Force needs leaders that can take on the rigorous challenges that affect our nation's security. Our mission will always be the enduring priority, but people are always the mode by which that mission succeeds or fails. Creating a climate in your detachment where people can



Photo Credit to: Det 620 Public Affairs

succeed will require training cadets to learn emotional intelligence and build a space of psychological safety. The ROTC environment is a learning atmosphere where it can be challenging to balance the need for adherence to our high moral and performance standards with the elements that create a space where personnel feel they can contribute and be heard. In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, author Amy Edmondson states, "in a psychologically safe workplace, people are not hindered by interpersonal fear. They feel willing and able to take the inherent interpersonal risks of candor. They fear holding back their full participation more than they fear sharing a potentially sensitive, threatening, or wrong idea". Cadre members can model and encourage a climate that promotes growing social skills. However, there are several cultural aspects that have a larger bearing on the way a detachment culture forms. Building an appropriate social climate will address power dynamics, the expectations around competition in the workplace, and cadet investment in team success vs. individual success.

Understanding U.S. cultural barriers to building a cohesive unit is a start to promoting an inclusive social environment in your detachment. Psychologist Gert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory can help to clarify broader cultural themes by exploring specific cultural elements that influence

U.S. citizens. The first dimension to address is power distance. In the U.S., we have a slight tendency toward allowing those in positions of power to influence our ideas and behavior. There are massive power differences in a military setting based on necessary chains of command. These power differences are inherent in how we operate but should not stop leaders from serving and understanding followers. It is also important to acknowledge that our society is driven by competition and achievement. We are taught from a young age the world values winning over enjoying what we do. Lastly, The U.S. is a highly individualistic culture, meaning that Americans default to looking after themselves and their direct family members. Loyalty is usually reserved for those close to us. The following sections address ways to utilize Air Force culture to build an inclusive detachment environment.

### **Utilizing Air Force Culture**

Several years ago, under the direction of Chief of Staff (CSAF) General David Goldfein, Air Force leadership pushed to revitalize our squadron structure. Squadrons are similarly sized units to the common Air Force ROTC detachment and create environments where personnel maintain close relationships. We have a ready-made environment for a culture that reduces the ill effects of an individualistic culture. Still, cadres must push for cadets to invest time and energy into the community. Events like First Friday, Role Calls (without the alcohol), and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation events should be normalized within every detachment. These events urge cadets to adopt the type of loyalty usually reserved for direct family members, and as a result, build an environment of trust and psychological safety. The resulting environment is one where cadets feel comfortable competing but also working together.

There will be outliers to these general rules. Individuals that do not conform to this culture of loyalty or who feel there are barriers to competition likely have a good reason. In a 2021 interview, Technical Sergeant Christopher Farley expressed his hesitance in competing for a position as an Air Force officer. He stated, “We talk about the need for diversity, but you don’t see it. I know that for me in particular, I don’t see many officers that look like me, who are black, and it doesn’t give me a lot of hope or motivation to where I can be an officer, and I’m sure I’m not the only one that feels that way” (personal Interview 15 July). Cadre members can help create an inclusive culture by mentoring cadets that may fall victim to this lack of buy-in. Connecting officer candidates to people that have overcome the same challenges can help to create investment and recover the drive for loyalty and competition.

Utilizing Air Force culture must also come with an acknowledgment of our past failures. The culture of the Air Force and the Department of Defense as a whole has been dominated by themes of masculinity since its inception. Shifting cultural norms now place females on equal footing with their male counterparts in today's Air Force. However, female cadets still represent a gender minority in ROTC settings. Cadre members should be aware of the potential that female cadets may struggle to find the same level of buy-in to detachment culture as their male counterparts. Once again, this is an area where cadre members can connect female cadets with active-duty members who have faced similar challenges. Sexism, racism, and truly, any form of discrimination is not acceptable for uniformed service members, and cadres should take any violation of that standard extremely seriously.

Ultimately, a successful detachment culture is one where members are free and willing to contribute to the overall success of the organization, no matter who they are.

## **Fitness Engagement**

A core component to success as an officer candidate is maintaining a high standard of physical fitness. The average officer candidate in 2021 reached a score of 95 points out of 100 on their



**Photo Credit to: Cadet Caleb Healea**

may struggle to compete, stay motivated, succeed academically, or even display the same confidence as their more experienced counterparts. Beyond confidence issues, some cadets struggle to meet body mass index requirements based on their body types. These cadets are forced to look for ways to train and comply with those standards through exercise and nutrition. We train as an Air Force to be physically ready to meet the challenges of warfare and present a professional image to the public. Fitness inspires confidence that the Air Force is prepared to meet any adversary. Air Force ROTC recognizes the need to incorporate fitness into our daily routines and dictates the necessity for a fitness program at every detachment per AFROTC Instruction 36-2011. Apart from setting an example in your fitness, cadre members have a host of options available to them to enhance opportunities for cadet fitness programs.

Fitness Assessment, according to data from tests administered at summer Field Training. As cadets acclimate to life at a university, their fitness is a crucial pillar of health that can make or break success. Cadets who begin their ROTC journey without an extensive fitness background

### **Campus Organizations**

Many campuses have Exercise Science departments that may be ripe for potential partnerships, internships, and additional resources offered to cadets who struggle to meet fitness standards. In the case of Bowling Green State University, the detachment partners with two graduate interns per semester to keep office hours and advise on personalized fitness plans for struggling cadets. Approaching the Exercise Science Department with the potential for an environment of consistent research subjects (cadets) is an appealing offer for many graduate students looking for thesis concentrations. In return, ROTC units gain a subject matter expert that can be a resource to any cadet.

Additionally, many campuses have nutritionists pursuing graduate studies. Detachment 620 found that the nutritionists on campus required a specific number of patient contact hours and were more than happy to hold office hours at the detachment to advise on cadet fitness through personalized plans. These aspects of campus engagement help cadets find safe and sustainable ways to meet Air Force standards for fitness.

### **Physical Training Culture:**

One of the required components within the ROTC program is 3 hours per week of physical training. All 145 detachments have unique spaces, customs, and cultures that help their physical training program succeed. As previously stated, the Cultural Dimensions Theory suggests that Americans thrive on competition. In fact, we expect competition and valuing it as part of a military environment. Cadre members can assist cadet leaders in building an

environment of physical competition while lifting up those who are struggling to meet standards through environments of high accountability and personal mentorship. Cadre members will be the primary example of how to mentor cadets to meet standards using all the resources available to them.

**Final Intent**

The intent behind this guide is to shape a common understanding of cultural competence across our ROTC enterprise as well as to iterate the importance of exploring the unique cultures that exist across our enterprise. If vetted and accepted by the appropriate chain of command, the guide is meant to be a living document governed by the National Holm Center Diversity and Inclusion Council.

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