Developing Leaders: The Use Of Challenge And Support To Develop USMA Cadets

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DEVELOPING LEADERS: THE USE OF CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT TO DEVELOP USMA CADETS

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Developing Leaders: The Use of Challenge and Support to Develop USMA Cadets

Abstract

Despite a mission statement containing a clear focus on individual leader development, multiple reports show that recent USMA graduates fell short in their performance as leaders of character. USMA has changed its leader development strategy to an outcomes-based program. Contemporary literature suggests that identity development should be the goal of any leadership program as a leader with a strong leadership identity will act in accordance with such an identity. Using criterion sampling the study utilized individual interviews to explore the experiences of cadet company commanders who served in the fall semester of 2016. This phenomenological qualitative study found first, the essence of the cadet experience included group influences, developmental influences, developing self, changing view of self with others, and a broadening view of leadership and follows contemporary leadership identity models. Second, the USMA experience appeared to reinforce a leader-centric view of groups and organizations and thereby delay development of interdependence. Third, when cadets served in challenging leadership positions over peers they realized they could not do it all themselves and developed into more trusting and confident leaders. Finally, the rotating active duty military staff and faculty significantly influenced the development of the majority of sampled cadets, and race and gender appeared to have played a role. Understanding how cadets develop a leadership identity and potentially remain motivated to act in accordance with that identity will go a long way in delivering the very best leaders for America’s Army.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
- Statement of the Problem ................................................................. 1
- Purpose of the Study ........................................................................... 8
- Research Questions ............................................................................ 8
- Theoretical Framework ......................................................................... 9
- Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope .................................................. 10
- Significance .......................................................................................... 11
- Definition of Terms ............................................................................ 11
- Conclusion ............................................................................................ 13

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW
- Leader Development at USMA ............................................................. 16
  - Development in College .................................................................... 17
- Leadership and Leader Development Theory ........................................ 19
  - Race in Leader Development Theory ................................................. 20
  - Gender in Leader Development Theory ............................................ 21
- Coaching and Mentoring Leaders ......................................................... 23
- Theoretical Framework ......................................................................... 24

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY
- Setting .................................................................................................. 29
- Participants .......................................................................................... 29
  - Participant Rights ............................................................................. 30
- Data ...................................................................................................... 31
- Analysis ............................................................................................... 31
- Potential Limitations ........................................................................... 32

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS
- Demographic Data .............................................................................. 33
- Findings ............................................................................................... 35
- Essence of the Experience .................................................................... 35
  - Pre-USMA Experiences .................................................................... 36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early USMA Experiences</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later USMA Experiences</td>
<td>588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching Interdependence</td>
<td>677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting and Confident Leaders</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors of Cadets</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence of the Experience</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching Interdependence</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting and Confident Leaders</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors of Cadets</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>1011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>1022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: STUDY INVITATION</td>
<td>1122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>1133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Demographic Data ........................................................................................................... 34
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. U.S. Army Attributes and Competencies ................................................................. 2

Figure 2. USMA’s Model for Framing Leader Development .................................................... 17

Figure 3. Developing a Leadership Identity, Illustrating the Cycle ............................................. 26
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly theory and research is in short supply when it comes to leader and leadership development (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; Northouse, 2016). Day et al. (2014) found that “there appears to be a widespread misperception that if the field could just identify and agree on the ‘correct’ leadership theory then the development piece would inevitably follow” (p. 64). Turns out to be not so simple for the community to agree on a leadership theory as many leadership styles and leader types exist and each style and type is effective in its own right.

Some contemporary leadership styles or types of leaders include humble leaders, authentic leaders, and servant leaders. A humble leader shows “followers how to grow by admitting what they do not know, modeling teach-ability, and acknowledging the unique skills, knowledge, and contributions of those around them” (Owens & Hekman, 2012, pp. 811-812). An authentic leader has passionate purpose, values-based behaviors, heartfelt compassion, consistent self-discipline, and connected relationships (George, 2003). An authentic leadership model describes leaders as conscious, competent, confident, and congruent (Fusco, O’Riordan, & Palmer, 2015).

Servant leaders are described as empowering and developing, humble, authentic, accepting, directing, and taking responsibility for the larger institution (van Dierendonck, 2011, pp. 1232-1234). In synthesizing the literature on servant leadership and comparing it to other leadership theories, van Dierendonck (2011) found that servant leadership subsumes transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, Level 5 leadership, empowering leadership, and self-sacrificing leadership. Servant leadership combines a leader’s
“motivation to lead with a need to serve” (p. 1254). Language in United States Military Academy (USMA) literature states, “officers serve the American people. Their self-concept must be that of ‘servant,’ one with specific duties. Officers provide for society that which society cannot provide for itself—security of our democratic Nation, its way of life, and its values” (USMA, 2009, p. 11).

A compilation of desirable leader attributes based on research done by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program found 22 universally-desirable leadership attributes (Northouse, 2016, p. 448). The U.S. Army used attributes and competencies to describe their desired leader (Figure 1). The Army selected the attributes of character, presence, and intellect along with the competencies of leading, developing, and achieving (U.S. Army, 2015, pp. 6-3 – 6-8).

Figure 1. U.S. Army attributes and competencies (U.S. Army, 2015)
Senior Army leaders believe that developing leaders “is integral to our institutional success today and tomorrow” (U.S. Army, 2015, p. vi). In their 2016 Posture Statement to Congress, the Secretary and the Chief of Staff of the Army wrote that the “Army is committed to build leaders of character who are technically and tactically proficient, adaptive, innovative, and agile” (U.S. Army, 2016, p. 7). The United States Military Academy (USMA) has always answered the Army’s call for leaders and USMA graduates served a large role in every major armed conflict in the history of the United States since the American Civil War.

Throughout the 1800’s and very early 1900’s the USMA leadership viewed strong character, broad intellect, powerful physique, and military skill as the hallmarks of an effective Army leader (Betros, 2012, p. 240). This view is reminiscent of the “Great Man” theory of the time (Northouse, 2016, p. 19). Following World War I, General Douglas MacArthur, as the USMA Superintendent, added leadership education and training to the cadet experience and superintendents throughout the 20th Century followed MacArthur’s lead and continued to add leadership studies and training to the curriculum (Betros, 2012, pp. 239-262).

By the 1990s, as the leadership research moved from an industrial to a postindustrial school of thought (Rost, 1991, p. 99), USMA’s leader development system codified into a framework known as the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS). This system contained the original four developmental pillars of moral-ethical, intellectual, physical, and military, but in the final version of CLDS, the Academy added two more developmental domains, human spirit and social (USMA, 2009).

The human spirit reflected that graduates will have the “strength of character and worldview to adapt effectively to combat and the uncertainties of a changing world” (USMA, 2009, p. 24). The addition of the social domain reflected that graduates will “interact
appropriately with others in a wide range of cultural, social and professional settings” (p. 30). These domains recognized the relational aspect of leadership in the post-industrial era.

Leadership theories “that rely on traits, behaviors, and situations to explain leadership worked well in an industrial era when the predominant goals of leadership were production and efficiency” (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005, p. 593), but the 21st century marked a shift in leadership to a more collaborative and relational process (Rost, 1991).

In 2010, the USMA Superintendent’s transition team found that the leader development framework was not integrated across the curriculum and leaders had very little power to enact significant change (USMA, 2011). The Superintendent directed a small group of USMA leaders to reassess the Cadet Leader Development System. That group recommended two major changes, first, that USMA more effectively integrate leader development outcomes; and second, that USMA form a standing committee to oversee the leader development system (USMA, 2011).

The Superintendent accepted those recommendations and established the new West Point Leader Development System. USMA currently defines a leader of character for the Army as one who lives honorably and builds trust; demonstrates intellectual, military, and physical competence; develops, leads, and inspires others; thinks critically and creatively; makes sound and timely decisions; communicates and interacts effectively; seeks balance, is resilient, and demonstrates a winning spirit; and pursues excellence and continues to grow (USMA, 2015a, p. 3). The Superintendent appointed the Commandant of Cadets, the Dean of Academics, and the Director of Athletics to serve as co-chairs of the new committee (USMA, 2011).
Statement of the Problem

The mission of the United States Military Academy is

…to educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of duty, honor, and country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the nation as an officer in the United States Army (USMA, 2015a, p. 3).

Despite this mission statement containing a clear focus on individual leader development, multiple reports show that recent USMA graduates fell short in their performance as leaders of character (USMA, 2014b; USMA, 2015b; USMA, 2016c). The Commandant of Cadets wrote that “we have to acknowledge that a small number of graduates…lack commitment to excellence…[t]hough we will never be perfect, it [perfection] is…what the American People and the Joint Force expect of West Point” (USMA, 2014a, p. 1). Individual development is key.

USMA has a world-renowned leader development program, but to successfully meet the mission, the development of each individual cadet, not the program, should be the focus of the staff and faculty (Shields, 2004). In search for opportunities to improve leader development at USMA, the Superintendent directed his staff to develop ways to ensure each graduate is prepared for a career of professional excellence. According to USMA documents the leader development program “challenges cadets with a continuum of developmental experiences across the military, academic, physical, and character programs…and these programs and associated experiences essentially comprise” the West Point Leader Development System (USMA, 2015a, p. 4).

This study focused on the continuum of challenging developmental experiences. Astin (1984) stated that “student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 528). Hanson (2014)
cautioned that in higher education there is a move toward making “learning outcomes, rather
than identity development, the centerpiece of...effort[s] to understand how college affect[s]
students” (p. 7). Until recently scientists believed that, by age 18, the brain was fully developed,
but evidence now shows that the brain continues to develop throughout life and the prefrontal
cortex, that gives rise to self-awareness and identity development, is not “developed structurally
or functionally until about the age of 25” (Blimling, 2013).

Kegan (1982) identified various stages of development based on one’s meaning-making
and perspective-taking on their experiences. Of note for this study are Kegan’s Stage 2 (The
Imperial Self), Stage 3 (The Interpersonal Self), and Stage 4 (Self-Authored Identity). Lewis,
Forsythe, Sweeney, Bartone, and Bullis (2005) conducted a longitudinal study at USMA and
found that Kegan Stage 2 students viewed others in terms of their own perspectives and interests
and progression through stages was not inevitable but depended “on level of environmental
challenge and support” (pp. 358-359). In USMA’s manual for leader development it states that
Stage 3 students are concerned about “a sense of belonging and the ability to command the
respect and admiration of others” while a Stage 4 student “is less likely to be influenced by
social pressures and expectations and is better able to make decisions and commitments based
upon internal principles and values” (USMA, 2009, pp. 17-18).

Lewis et al. (2005) found that over 80% of USMA seniors are either in Kegan’s Stage 2,
transitioning to Stage 3, or in Stage 3. Though the majority of senior cadets were in Stage 3 and
viewing their world from multiple perspectives, almost 38% of seniors were in Stage 2 or
transitioning to Stage 3 (Lewis et al., 2005). The study found that fewer than 1 in 5 cadets were
transitioning to Stage 4 and not one cadet in the study had reached a full Stage 4 (p. 364). Lewis
et al. (2005) found that progressing to Stage 4 is “critical to the growth of autonomous
professionals, professionals of the sort capable of exercising sound judgment in the face of the complex, ambiguous, and rapidly changing situations that increasingly characterize modern work life” (p. 360). Kegan (1994) argues that in order for one to be an effective leader one must be capable of self-authorship (Stage 4). Given the number of senior cadets Lewis et al. (2005) found in Stage 2 and transitioning to Stage 3, it should be no wonder that each year a small number of graduates performed below the expected standard for a leader of character and appeared to lack commitment to the Army.

A contemporary emphasis in the literature is that a fully developed identity should be the goal of any leader development program (Sanford, 1967; Lord & Hall, 2005; Komives et al. 2005; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Baxter Magolda, 2014; Hanson, 2014). Komives, Longerbeam, Mainella, Osteen, and Owen (2009) found that focusing “on self-efficacy enhances the leadership development outcomes of educational interventions” (p. 30). Komives et al. (2005) used stages of development to describe how a college student develops a leadership identity. They found most college-aged students were in Stage Three (Leader Identified) of the Leadership Identity Development Model and viewed leadership as a position one held. Students maintain this leader-centric view throughout most of their college years. At Stage Four (Leadership Differentiated), a student starts to realize that leadership is not solely positional based, but one can lead in a group whether in a formal position or not (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). Strong group membership, learning about leadership, and the presence of adult mentors and peer role models serve as key environmental factors in transitioning through developmental stages (Komives et al. 2006). Transition to Stage Four is complex, yet critical in developing leaders.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey to become leaders of character. By using highly successful cadets as the sample population researcher explored how the cadets viewed their developmental experience and how the environment shaped their leadership identity development.

Lewis et al. (2005) found that cadets “determined to be more psychologically mature on the basis of a Kegan subject/object interview were rated by tactical officers and cadet leaders across their junior and senior year as having more effectively carried out their cadet leader responsibilities” (p. 365). Given company commanders are among the highest military rated cadets in the senior class and hand-selected by their tactical officers to lead the company, the study looked at cadets who served as company commanders since they are likely operating at the higher stages of development among their peers (Lewis et al. 2005).

Research Questions

1. How do cadets who recently completed commanding a cadet company describe the experience?
2. What challenges did the cadets encounter over the course of the experience?
3. In what ways did the cadets find support? How did that support change over time? Did this support differ based on race or gender?
4. What prior experiences did cadets believe best prepared them to serve in the role of company commander? In what ways were the cadets challenged and supported as cadet commanders?
5. Now that these cadets are out of command and not in a formal leadership position how do they view their role in the company? How do others view their role?

Theoretical Framework

A number of theoretically-based models and frameworks exist on leadership and leader development and a “useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomena… a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon” (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 5). Since leaders are developed (Arvey, Avolio, Zhang, & Krueger, 2007; Avolio & Hannah, 2008; and Northouse, 2016) and the leadership style or leader type is effective in its own right (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014), the researcher used the development of a leadership identity as the scaffolding for the study. The framework used is the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al. 2005) placed upon the West Point Leader Development System. Komives et al. (2005) defined leadership identity as the “cumulative confidence in one’s ability to intentionally engage with others to accomplish group objectives” (p. 608).

To place this theory and model in the USMA environment the study explored the essence of cadet experiences focused on challenge and support as cadets transitioned through the stages of leadership identity development (Komives et al. 2009). In transitioning to Stage Four (Leadership Differentiated), the stage where one finds leaders who can successfully operate in complex and ambiguous situations (Lewis et al. 2005), Komives et al. (2006) found that students “must take on more complex leadership challenges that promoted the recognition that they could not do everything themselves and that the talents and skills of group members were vital for organizational success” (p. 409). To reach self-authorship in the college years, cadets must
engage in learning partnerships with staff and faculty where authority is shared and trust is
developed (Baxter Magolda, 2014, p. 31).

The researcher explored the leadership experiences of a sample of cadet commanders at
USMA. Individual interviews conducted following command served as the primary method of
data collection. The information obtained from this method, as well as document reviews,
formed the basis for the study’s findings.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Based on the researcher’s experience as a USMA graduate, Company Tactical Officer,
retired Army officer, and now as Special Assistant to the Commandant of Cadets, it was
important to remove, or at least consciously work to limit “prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions
regarding the phenomenon under investigation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 199). A limitation in the
study was that a researcher cannot capture all cadet experiences and influencers, but this
limitation was mitigated through a sufficient level of interviewer inquiry. The researcher
remained focused on the common themes and essence of the experiences up to and including
command and the months immediately following when the cadets remained as members of the
company, but took on less demanding positional leadership roles.

The scope of the study was limited to no more than the 36 company commanders. There
are other USMA leader experiences such as battalion, regimental, and brigade commanders, as
well as, sport team captains and club leaders. These positions were not studied as part of the
research and are recommended for future studies, but for those members of the sample
population of company commanders that had other significant leader roles such as extra-
curricular club or team leadership, the interviewer explored those experiences. This study did not
address the population of cadets developmentally stagnating in a Stage 2 or transitioning to Stage
3 level, as defined by Kegan (1994). Though this information would be invaluable in helping to understand what challenges and supports were missing from their experiences, this research was beyond the scope of this study and recommended for future research.

Significance

To ensure relevancy in today’s changing world, institutions must continually look for opportunities to improve their policies and programs (Bardach, 2012). Research supports that cadets engaging in meaningful leadership positions while coupled with supportive coaches or mentors will accelerate leader development (Avolio and Hannah, 2008). Today at USMA there are insufficient meaningful leadership positions in the Corps of Cadets chain of command that are coupled with a dedicated mentor or coach (USMA, 2016a). To enable such an environment to exist for all cadets would require significant change at USMA. Results from this study should inform policy and program decisions at USMA, particularly those policies under consideration by the West Point Leader Development System Committee.

Definition of Terms

_Cadet Company_ is an organizational structure inside the United States Corps of Cadets. The organization consists of approximately 130 cadets representing freshmen to seniors. Through purposeful assignment the demographics of the company are roughly equal across all 36 entities. Demographics include race, gender, academic aptitude, and athletic participation.

_Cadet Company Commander_ operates under the guidance of the Tactical Officer and Cadet Battalion Commander. This cadet commands the cadet company. The Company Commander is responsible for the good order, discipline, internal administration, supply, maintenance, training, morale, and general efficiency of the company. The Company
Commander sets the example and is a role model for the company in terms of professional Army ethics and the standards of conduct expected of a cadet (USMA, 2016a, p. 5-1).

Class Designators exist at West Point for each year,

Firstie is a term used to describe a member of the first class (senior).

Cow is a term used to describe a member of the second class (junior).

Yearling is a term used to describe a member of the third class (sophomore).

Plebe is a term used to describe a member of the fourth class (freshman).

Tactical Officers are successful company-level commanders from the Army who spend a year studying organizational leadership and development at Columbia’s Teachers College. The company tactical officers “serve as coaches, teachers, and mentors to each cadet in the company, and assess their performance throughout their 47-month experience at West Point” (USMA, 2009, p. 34).

Tactical Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) are successful platoon sergeants from the Army who partner with the tactical officer in coaching, teaching, and mentoring each cadet in the company.

West Point Leader Development System Committee is a governing body that is chaired by the Dean, Commandant, and Athletic Director focused on the system USMA uses to develop cadet leader capacities. Membership includes representatives from all departments. Sub-committees include Assessment, Integration, and Education.

Cadet Basic Training (CBT/Beast) is a “complex, demanding progression of sequenced training requirements and events, which form the foundation for all future instruction…trains, instructs, inspires, and transitions New Cadets from civilians…to Cadets and…begins to inculcate the fundamental military skills and values” (USMA, 2017, p. 14).
**Cadet Field Training** (CFT/Buckner) is to “develop, train, test, and…prepare Third Class Cadets to assume duties as NCOs in the Corps of Cadets; instill the warrior ethos in each Cadet; and inspire each Cadet to professional excellence through physically and mentally demanding training” (USMA, 2017, p. 18).

**Cadet Leader Development Training** (CLDT) “trains, mentors, and assesses basic leadership skills focusing on Troop Leading Procedures, effective communication, and tactical decision making in order to develop competent and confident small unit leaders capable of operating in an uncertain and rapidly changing environment” (USMA, 2017, p. 21).

**Conclusion**

This qualitative study describes the leader development experiences of USMA cadets from the perspective of select senior year cadets who served in challenging leadership positions as company commanders and likely operated at the higher end of psychosocial development in comparison to their peers. The researcher structured the study to focus on those experiences that led to assignment as a cadet company commander, the experience of command, and the experience immediately following command. The findings will inform USMA leaders on potential changes to their leader development strategy.

Chapter 2 consists of the relevant literature on leader development, with a specific focus on literature that addresses the development of a leadership identity. Theories of human development of college-aged adults serve as a central theme. The chapter also includes research on peer and adult influencers, race, and gender as each impact the developmental process of college students. This chapter also more fully describes the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter 3 includes the study’s methodology grounded in the theoretical framework. The chapter describes the study setting and identifies the researcher’s relationship to the participants.
The chapter includes information on how the sample population was selected and how the researcher gained access. The type data collected and the analytical methods applied are also covered in this chapter. The researcher explains what protections were in place to ensure participants’ rights were not violated.

Chapter 4 consists of the results of the data analysis. An analysis of the data produced four findings based on the interviews and documents review. First, the essence of the cadet experience included group influences, developmental influences, developing self, changing view of self with others, and a broadening view of leadership. Second, the USMA experience appeared to reinforce a leader-centric view for this sample of cadets. Third, serving in select leadership positions over peers was when these cadets realized they could not do it all and they started to develop themselves as more trusting and confident leaders. Finally, the rotating active duty military staff and faculty significantly influenced the development of the majority of sampled cadets and race and gender appeared to have played a role.

Chapter 5 discusses the study’s findings as they relate to the literature, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future studies.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Avolio & Hannah (2008) found that the developmental readiness of the individual is more important to the process of development than the leader developer or the developmental techniques and “leaders with higher levels of developmental readiness in the right context will be better able to reflect upon and make meaning out of events, challenges, and/or opportunities that can stimulate and accelerate positive leader development” (p. 332). Much has changed in the US Military Academy (USMA) environmental context over the past thirty years. Not only has the global security environment become more complex and ambiguous, placing new and unique demands on leaders, but USMA has moved from a fairly isolated White-male dominated institution to one with information-age linkages and marked increases in female, Hispanic, Asian, and African-American populations among the students, staff, and faculty (Betros, 2012). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey to become leaders of character. Meeting the purpose of this study provided insights into changes that USMA could adopt for an appropriately designed leader development program so that each graduate is prepared for a career of professional excellence as a leader of character for the Army.

This literature review captured how USMA evolved over time and includes the demographical changes in the Corps of Cadets. The review included current theories and practices in the field of leadership and leader development with a focus on how these theories apply to the development of young adults in college settings. The review covered the most recent theories on gender and race as they apply to leadership and leader development. This literature
review set the stage to support a focus on the role of coaching or mentoring as part of a supportive environment for leaders to develop. The findings in the literature guided understanding about the developmental needs of individual cadets becoming leaders of character for the U.S. Army. This chapter ends with a description of the theoretical framework of the study.

Leader Development at USMA

The primarily White-male population that dominated USMA’s landscape for almost two centuries began changing in the later part of the 20th Century. The population of racial minorities at USMA remained at five percent until the early 1970s (Betros, 2012). Women first entered USMA in 1976 and their representation in the corps remained at roughly ten to twelve percent for much of the final quarter of the 20th Century (Betros, 2012). Today, significant population increases exist for both racial minorities and women in the Corps of Cadet population. The two most recent USMA classes consisted of well over twenty percent women while racial minorities now make-up over twenty-five percent of the corps (USMA, 2016b).

The USMA Model for framing leader development (Figure 2) consists of the individual cadet’s readiness to develop, developmental experiences, reflection, new capacities and knowledge, and time (USMA, 2009, pp. 20-22). USMA defined readiness as a cadet’s preparedness for a developmental experience (p. 20). USMA defined developmental experiences as “planned and unplanned activities or events that challenge cadets to question their current perspectives” (p. 20). These experiences include assessment, challenge, and support. USMA defined reflection as cadets, in structured settings, understanding their experiences (p. 21). USMA defined new capacities and knowledge as “new perspectives, understandings, and skills for developing leaders” (p. 21). Finally, USMA defined time as the 47 month experience.
Figure 2. USMA’s model for framing leader development (USMA, 2009)

Development in College

Lewis et al. (2005) described USMA as a “highly selective, racially and geographically diverse four-year military college that provides students with both a traditional academic education as well as extensive military training” (p. 363). In comparing first year USMA cadets to a similar sample of first year students at a selective state university, Lewis et al. (2005) found that the percentages at each of Kegan’s developmental stage levels were similar leading to the conclusion that literature on college student development would apply in similar ways to USMA cadets (p. 366). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) used four clusters of theories in explaining development of college students. The clusters are psychosocial, cognitive-structural, typological, and person-environment (p. 18). These clusters are not distinct and possess much overlap with each other.
Psycho-social is defined as a process of individual development that is partly due to age and partly due to cultural or environmental influences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Crain (1985) found that in young adulthood individuals are primarily self-absorbed and “concerned with who they are, how they appear in the eyes of others, and what they will become” (p. 170). Chickering (1990) found that colleges should focus on psycho-social development and his vectors were that college students develop competence, manage emotions, develop autonomy, establish identity, interpersonal relationships, find purpose, and develop integrity (pp. 8-19). Kegan (1982) refers to a person as “an ever progressive motion engaged in giving itself a new form” (pp. 7-8).

Cognitive-structural theorists focus on the development of cognitive structures that give meaning to an individual’s world (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Crain (1985) found that as people develop they exhibit “increasingly comprehensive ways of thinking” (p. 90). Perry (1970) believed that college students tend to move from a dualistic perception to one of relativism in a pluralistic world.

Typological theorists focus on categorization of individuals and how that specific category influences how an individual perceives or responds to their world (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These theories look at the impact of individual learning styles and how these styles explain why students respond differently to their college experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The person-environment interaction theorists acknowledge that one’s environment plays a role in shaping behavior and development. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) found “environments select and shape the behavior of the people occupying any given setting, tending to influence them in similar ways despite their individual differences” (p. 39).
Lewis et al. (2005) used Kegan’s theory of identity development to show that most cadets entered the Academy with “relatively simple ways of making meaning, and for many the college years are a time of significant developmental change [but] the key development issue is not self-authorship but establishing shared meaning” (p. 357). The authors found that a Stage 4 conceptual capacity (Self-Authorship), the stage where successful leaders operate, is rarely met by any college-aged student and, in their study, not one USMA cadet in the sample was operating at Stage 4 (pp. 364-365).

Leadership and Leader Development Theory

Leadership and leader development research showed that one framework might not fit best for every organization so alternative frameworks need exploration to deepen the understanding of leadership and leader development (Mabey, 2013). Owen (2012) cautioned that “because college students are complex, multifaceted individuals, it is important not to misuse or over-apply any one developmental theory” (p. 29). In addition, organizational leaders should move away from viewing leader development as a set program in a set location and realize leader development “is a continuous process that can take place anywhere” (O’Connell, 2014, p. 199).

Clarke (2013), looking through the lens of human resources, focused his research away from the individual leader to the organization. He stated that the individual behaviors are just part of the larger organizational environment. Avolio and Hannah (2008) proposed that the three areas an organization must review before engaging in leader development include the readiness of the individual to engage in leader development, the leader developer’s ability to assess the individual’s readiness, and the organization’s readiness to develop leaders.

Komives et al. (2006) developed a theory of leadership identity development based on a stage model. The stages of the model include awareness, exploration/engagement, leader
identified, leadership differentiated, generativity, and integration (Komives et al. 2009, p. 14). Stage Four (leadership differentiated) is the key transition and should be the goal of college staff and faculty involved with leader development (p. 23). Stage Four leaders facilitate groups in positive directions whether they are in a leadership position or not. These Stage Four leaders place value in teams and learn the systems impacting the team (p. 19).

**Race in Leader Development Theory**

Existing research on leadership fails to adequately address race and there is almost a color-blindness that permeates the theories on leadership (Dugan, Kodama, & Gebhardt, 2012, p. 175). Leadership skills are positively influenced by the collegiate experience and early experiences in college foster a student’s leadership potential (Parker & Pascarella, 2013). Kelly and Dixon (2014) found a number of African-American students have a particularly difficult transition to college and this difficulty is exacerbated when the institution is predominantly white. Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found Latino students transitioning to college drew support not from the staff and faculty, but from peers and upper-class Latino students (p. 149).

Arminio, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, and Washington (2000) found that racial minority students shied away from leader roles in college due to invoking high social costs. Dugan et al. (2012) described the importance of a college’s staff and faculty understanding racial identity in order to create a positive college environment for students of color. They found that “for students of color the effective development of an internally validated racial self-concept was a significant contributor to leadership capacity” (p. 184). Research also showed that successful black leaders drew from multiple mentors and coaches while successful white leaders primarily drew from a single mentor (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Hu, Thomas, and Lance (2008) found that mentors and
protégés preferred same-race mentor relationships and that protégés perceived barriers with cross-race mentor relationships.

**Gender in Leader Development Theory**

Though USMA recently increased the population of female cadets, social role theory reflects the stereotyping of women (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). This stereotyping leads to gender-role selections in traditionally female positions (Koenig & Eagly, 2014, p. 385). Koenig and Eagly (2014) found that organizations could change the stereotyping by placing women in leadership roles. Northouse (2016) found that women are “underrepresented in the upper echelons of America’s corporations and political system” (p. 398). In the 2017 school year at USMA both the Commandant of Cadets and the Dean of the Academic Board, two of the top three positions at USMA, were women and they each represented the first woman to serve in their respective positions.

A meta-analysis of previous studies showed that women and men differ in leadership styles, in leadership behaviors, and in evaluating leadership (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). These researchers found that most organizations have been created by and for men and therefore systems, policies, norms, and structures tend to favor men (p. 350). Organizations must assist women in their leadership development by providing education and training, executive coaching or mentoring, stretch assignments, professional networks, and career planning (Hopkins et al. 2008).

In exploring the gender gap in colleges, Sax and Harper (2007) found that “women struggle more with developing autonomy…report more emotional stress, chose stereotypically ‘feminine’ majors, express less confidence in their self-assessments…and have different styles of learning” compared to men (p. 672). The authors looked at nineteen desired college outcomes
and found twelve gender gaps that they attribute to college including that women’s “confidence in their leadership abilities remains significantly lower than men’s, and...the differential is partially attributable to women’s lower sense of ‘competitiveness’” (p. 689). With women in leadership positions, Arvey, Avolino, Zhang, & Krueger (2007) found that work experience accounted for variance in role occupancy. Work experience factors included educational experiences, peer groups, mentors, role models, training and development, challenges in past jobs, and prior successes in leadership (p. 701).

Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) found gender biases limited women’s leadership development and there was a benefit in teaching leadership in women-only groups in order to meet the needs of this population. The authors explained that, in most developmental programs for women, there are “too few role models, organizational practices that fail to take women’s lives into account, suboptimal networks, or excessive performance pressures” (p. 486). Ely et al. (2011) reported that leadership development can occur in a variety of venues and gender-pure and mixed gender programs are both appropriate at times, but faculty in each venue must be conversant in gender dynamics.

Cohen, Melton, and Welty-Peachry (2014) looked at the impact of co-educational sports on the attitudes of men and women participants in regards to inclusivity and equality. They reported that both men and women in co-educational sports showed stereotype reduction and the women demonstrated increased confidence and pride. The USMA program requires all cadets to participate each semester in a sport. Though every cadet is expected to be an athlete, not every cadet participates in mixed-gender sports (USMA, 2009). Many cadets find themselves on gender-pure teams, however every cadet company, down to the squad level, is mixed-gender.
Coaching and Mentoring Leaders

Berkovich (2014) found that leadership development occurs through dialogic communications such as mentoring and encounter groups (p. 256). A pedagogical framework consisting of candor, inclusion, confirmation, and presentness sets the backdrop for an interaction of eight operational components – self-exposure, open-mindedness, empathy, care, respect, critical thinking, contact, and mutuality (Berkovich, 2014, p. 250-254). This type of pedagogy places dialogue at the core of leadership development.

Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang, and Avolio (2011) conducted a longitudinal field experiment at USMA assessing the impact of mentoring on a leader’s efficacy. They found that mentorship programs can enhance leader efficacy. They also found that efficacy was even greater when the cadet had a desire for feedback and there was trust in the relationship.

Strengths-based coaching can move an average leader to one with much greater capacity as each member of the team contributes in a unique way. Strengths-based coaching methodology helps individuals specifically find those strengths and develop them further (Welch, Grossaint, Reid, & Walker, 2014). Morgan, Harkins, and Goldsmith (2005) expressed that coaches, not unlike mentors, take good leaders and make them better, more effective, and able to reach their full capabilities, however, a coach or mentor cannot gain sufficient knowledge about a protégé by just talking to him or her. Stelter (2014) moved the discussion on coaching past focusing on specific objectives of the protégé, or even on a known challenge they face, to a relationship that is focused on values and identity development. His approach was to develop a new dialogue culture where the focus is on reflection of one’s own experiences and thoughts.

Peer coaching can also enhance development, both personally and professionally. A study of MBA students concluded that peer coaching works when the conditions are set for the
relationship to develop, there is successful development, and the protégé internalizes the learning by becoming a peer coach in the future (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008).

Bennis and Nanus (2007) stated that leaders learn from experiences and most leaders “identify a small number of mentors and key experiences that powerfully shaped their philosophies, personalities, aspirations and operating styles” (p. 176). Higgins and Kram (2001) found that mentorship enhances career development, progress, success, satisfaction, competence, and professional identity. Many organizations have moved from the traditional dyadic mentorship relationships to more of a multiple relationship phenomenon or constellation of influencers and any design of a mentorship program must consider these multiple relationships as well as changing technologies, organizational structure, and organizational membership (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

Desjardins (2010) stated that a theoretical framework provides a picture of all the variables and relationships involved in the study. The dependent variable in this study is the individual leader development of each cadet and more specifically the development of a leadership identity. The use of adults, older peers, reflection, and meaningful involvement in groups as developmental influences are independent variables in the study. Avolio and Hannah (2008) discuss the readiness of the individual to develop and that developmental readiness would stand out as an intermediate variable directly impacting the dependent variable of leadership identity development. Komives et al. (2009) would view this readiness as the changing view of self from dependent, to independent, to finally achieving interdependence as the cadet broadens their view of leadership (p. 15).
The theoretical framework is that leadership identity is developed. Avolio and Hannah (2008) stated that “recent research comparing identical and fraternal twins that much of the variance in terms of who ends up in leadership roles is better explained by environmental factors versus heritability” (p. 333). Certain environmental factors come together to form experiences that set the stage for development. When those factors and experiences are developmentally appropriate for an emerging leader, that leader can move forward in a positive direction. When a coach or mentor knows the developing leader’s needs, that person can provide challenging experiences and help that leader make sense of those experiences leading to positive leader development.

Merriam (2009) explained that “qualitative research is designed to inductively build rather than to test concepts, hypotheses, and theories” (p. 64). Komives et al. (2005) used a grounded theory approach to build a model for developing a leadership identity. The researchers identified six stages of development for a leadership identity. The three most salient stages in this study are Stage Two (exploration/engagement), Stage Three (leader identified), and Stage Four (leadership differentiated). The authors described Stage Two individuals as those who get involved with groups, take on responsibilities, but do not take on leadership roles (p. 606). Stage Three individuals take a leader-centric view of groups and believed that “one was a leader only if one held a leadership position” (p. 606). Finally, Stage Four individuals held the view that “anyone in the group can do leadership” (p. 606).

Komives et al. (2005) found that various categories interacted to develop a leadership identity. These categories include group influences, developing self, changing view of self, and broadening view of leadership. Each category is impacted by developmental influencers defined
as adults, peers, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning. The cycle of leadership identity development is shown at Figure 3.

Figure 3. Developing a leadership identity, illustrating the cycle (Komives et al. 2005)

Owen (2012) mapped the stages of the leadership identity development model to other developmental models and found that most college students operate at Stage Three of leadership identity (Komives et al., 2005), Stage 3 of stages of consciousness (Kegan, 1994), and Stage 3 of journey to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2014). Lewis et al. (2005) found similar results and stated that progression to Stage 4 “is critical to the growth of autonomous professionals” (p. 360), yet very few college-aged students develop beyond Stage 3 (p. 360).
Conclusion

USMA evolved from a white-male dominated institution to one with significant racial and gender diversity and its recent graduates were operating in a global security environment much more complex and ambiguous than faced by previous generations. At the same time leadership theory moved from an industrial era view focused on hierarchical organizations to a post-industrial era view focused on relationships and interdependent systems.

The college years are a time of significant growth for students. Individual development moves along stages ranging from self-interest to self-authorship. The literature on college student development shows that race and gender play a role, especially if the institution population is primarily white and male. In addition, to help maximize the value of the college experience many students turn to adults to help make meaning of the world around them.

This search for meaning during the college years facilitates the development of a student’s identity. At USMA, part of a cadet’s identity is that of a leader. The researcher used the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2005) to explore with a select sample of first class cadets, men and women of different races, the essence of their shared experience with a particular focus on the challenges they encountered and the support they received while on this developmental journey toward developing a leadership identity. The next chapter describes the methodology used in selecting those first class cadets and the collection and analysis of the data to gain an appreciation for the essence of the cadet experience.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

US Military Academy (USMA) leadership is striving for a deeper understanding of the experiential process of developing leaders. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey to become leaders of character.

The research sought to understand the cadets’ development as leaders. The researcher used college student development theories to inform the study with the leadership identity development model (Komives et al. 2005) as the primary theoretical framework. Data collection was conducted through examining documents and interviewing participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Through this data collection the research uncovered emerging themes in the areas of challenges and supports in the cadet environment leading to development of a leadership identity and thereby may assist USMA leaders in better understanding the cadet leader development process. Research questions developed to help obtain the study’s purpose included,

1. How do cadets who just finished commanding a cadet company describe the experience?
2. What challenges did the cadets encounter over the course of the experience?
3. In what ways did the cadets find support? How did that support change over time? Did this support differ based on race or gender?
4. What prior experiences did cadets believe best prepared them to serve in the role of company commander? In what ways were the cadets challenged and supported as cadet commanders?
5. Now that these cadets are out of command and not in a formal leadership position how do they view their role in the company? How do others view their role?

Setting

The setting is the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. USMA’s population is 4400 cadets with a blend of military and civilian staff and faculty. The cadets range in age from 17-28 years old (USMA, 2009; USMA 2016b). The mission of the Academy is to develop leaders of character for the U.S. Army. All cadets participate in military training, athletics, physical education, and character development programs in addition to their academic courses. The Corps of Cadets is organized in a brigade structure consisting of 4 regiments each with 9 companies. Each company consists of roughly 130 cadets. Each company has a U.S. Army captain serving as the Tactical Officer and a U.S. Army Sergeant First Class serving as a Tactical NCO. The senior cadet in the company is the commander (USMA 2009; USMA, 2016a; USMA, 2016b).

Participants

Using criterion sampling, the researcher explored the experiences of cadet company commanders who served in the fall semester of 2016. All 36 serving commanders were offered the opportunity to voluntarily participate in the study which consisted of an interview and a review of the interview transcript. Creswell (2013) advised that it “is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 155). These 36 cadets were hand selected by their tactical officers to serve as commanders based on their holistic performance over their first three years at USMA. Lewis et al. (2005) found that these types of cadets are likely operating at a more advanced stage of identity development compared to their classmates. The experience as company commander provided cadets an opportunity to lead an
organization consisting of over 130 cadets representing all four classes. The commander relies on a formal chain of command and an array of informal leaders for unit success. Of the 36 cadet commanders invited, 12 agreed to participate in the study.

The 36 commanders in the requested population consisted of 27 men and 9 women. Of the 27 men, 19 were Caucasian, 4 were Hispanic, 2 were Asian, and 2 were African-American. Of the 9 women, 8 were Caucasian and 1 was Hispanic. The cadets ranged in age from 21-28 years old. The 12 cadet commanders who participated in the study consisted of 10 men and 2 women. Of the 10 men, 8 were Caucasian, 1 was Hispanic, and 1 was African-American. Both women in the study were Caucasian. The cadets ranged in age from 21-28 years old.

**Participant Rights**

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary and the researcher worked to ensure his position did not unduly influence volunteerism. Participants were informed that they could opt out at any time and refuse to answer any question in the study and/or exclude any answers they did not want included in the study. No cadet refused to answer a question or asked for an answer to be stricken from the study. Many cadets chose not to use names when discussing either other cadets or members of the staff and faculty. Informed consent forms were utilized (Appendix C).

Confidentiality was provided to participants by assigning pseudonyms and dispersing narratives throughout the study instead of complete individual stories, where possible (Creswell, 2013). The transcripts of the individual interviews remain safeguarded by the researcher in a locked drawer inside a locked office and on a password protected personal computer. The researcher informed participants that, though every safeguard was utilized, privacy could not be completely guaranteed. The researcher shared transcripts with participants as a means of
member-checking the data. Finally, findings from the study were embargoed from publishing until all cadets graduated and departed USMA in May 2017.

Data

Data collection came from various sources. The researcher had unfettered access to all USMA strategic planning and program documents which were reviewed to help the researcher understand the environment and the systems involved in the leader development process at USMA. The primary data source was interviews with the cadet commanders.

The interview design was semi-structured in order to remain focused on the research purpose, but allow freedom to explore deeper the experiences of the cadets. According to Merriam (2009), the use of a semi-structured interview “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 90). The interviews allowed a deeper understanding of the essence of the cadet commanders’ challenges and supports.

The interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office as it was private, quiet, free from distractions, and convenient proximity to cadets which are four characteristics of an interview setting hard to find at West Point. The interviews were recorded by use of a password protected iPhone placed on the table near the cadet. In order to remain sensitive to the cadets’ time the interviews remained at approximately 90 minutes. Upon completion of the individual interviews the researcher utilized Rev Incorporated to transcribe the audio.

Analysis

The interview transcripts served as the key data source. The captured data was analyzed as it was gathered so the data did not become “unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). The researcher coded each transcript line by line as it
was received from Rev Incorporated via e-mail. Simultaneously, the researcher sent the cadets an electronic copy of the interview to check on the accuracy of, and their comfort with, the interview content. As more transcripts were made available a cross-case analysis became possible (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This coding facilitated grouping data into categories responsive to the researcher’s purpose that were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009, pp. 185-186). As these categories were refined the analysis moved to alignment with models and theories “to explain the data’s meaning” (p. 192).

Potential Limitations

The study was limited as it focused in on the experiences of a select sample of cadet commanders. The study excluded many populations of cadets. Many demographic categories of cadets are not represented such as Asian men and women, African-American women, and Hispanic women. The experiences of these categories of cadets may likely be different from the sample population studied and therefore recommended for a future study. Given that many cadet populations were not represented in the study, along with the qualitative nature of the study, the cadets reflecting back many years, and the difficulty in accurately assessing student development, caution should be applied in generalizing the findings of this study to all cadets.

Another limiting factor in this study is the researcher’s role as an insider. The researcher brought many biases to this study that required bracketing to ensure biases did not appear in the interviews or in the analysis. Use of colleague reviews as the study progressed provided a check on researcher bias. The researcher remained conscious of his position in the organization and the potential impact of that position on cadet answers during the interviews.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey to become leaders of character. The Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2006) served as the theoretical framework in designing the research questions. Komives et al. (2005) defined leadership identity as the “cumulative confidence in one’s ability to intentionally engage with others to accomplish group objectives” (p. 608).

Demographic Data

Demographic information on the cadet participants in the study consisted of 10 men and 2 women. They ranged in age from 21-28 years old. Three served as extra-curricular leaders while serving as a cadet company commander. Specific demographic data is shown in Table 1.
Table 1.

Demographic Data by Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
<th>Extra-Curricular Leader</th>
<th>Key CoC Positions</th>
<th>Squad Leader</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PSG</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PSG</td>
<td>Y/Y*</td>
</tr>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PSG</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PSG/PL*</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PSG</td>
<td>Y*</td>
</tr>
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<td>XO*</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Humanities</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PSG</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Legend
AA – African American
H – Hispanic
C – Caucasian
PSG – Platoon Sergeant
XO – Executive Officer
Y – served as Squad Leader during Academic Year
* – served in position only during summer training
N – never served as Squad Leader

The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and focused on the research questions:

1. How do cadets who recently completed commanding a cadet company describe the experience?

2. What challenges did the cadets encounter over the course of the experience?
3. In what ways did the cadets find support? How did that support change over time? Did this support differ based on race or gender?

4. What prior experiences did cadets believe best prepared them to serve in the role of company commander? In what ways were the cadets challenged and supported as cadet commanders?

5. Now that these cadets are out of command and not in a formal leadership position how do they view their role in the company? How do others view their role?

Findings

An analysis of the data produced four findings based on the interviews and documents review. First, the essence of the cadet experience included group influences, developmental influences, developing self, changing view of self with others, and a broadening view of leadership. Second, the USMA experience appeared to reinforce a leader-centric view for this sample of cadets. Third, serving in select leadership positions over peers was when these cadets realized they could not do it all and they started to develop themselves as more trusting and confident leaders. Finally, the rotating active duty military staff and faculty significantly influenced the development of the majority of sampled cadets and race and gender appeared to have played a role.

Essence of the Experience

The research questions revolved around the essence of the cadet experience. The cadets described their experiences with a focus on their interactions within various groups and how they were challenged and supported in these experiences.
Pre-USMA Experiences

The cadets’ experiences just prior to arriving at USMA included high school. For some in the population it included time in the Army and time at the USMA Prep School which is located on the grounds of West Point, but is a separate entity from the Military Academy.

Group influences. Wayne’s high school interpersonal experiences revolved around sports and academics. As he reflected on that time of his life, he stated, “I think that who I am and how I lead and how I approach situations and how I problem solve with people…finds its roots…when I was a leader of a…sports group.” Wayne found diverse relationships in high school.

I had a good group of friends, a great, great group of friends. It was really funny when you look at my group of friends it was the Breakfast Club, if you ever saw that movie. Not to knock on my friends at all. I had the super weird, nerdy kid, big glasses, Steve Urkel kind of character, and I was friends with those and that was my academic group. My other group of friends was the jocks, the football players, the hockey players, the lacrosse players, the guys in the weight room. Those groups of friends never interacted in high school. That's a very materialistic way of looking at it but that was the truth in my high school. I felt very comfortable in both. I was at home, I was in my element in both cases. The guys in one group made fun of me because I worked out and the guys in the other group made fun of me because I had good grades. That's the way it was, and I would say, primarily, I would not have been in the high energy, optimistic, emotional state that I was in if it weren't for my friends and for that very tight knit group of kids. These interpersonal peer relationships are central to this stage of development. Dean found that as he progressed through the Boy Scouts many peers left the program. “Most of the
people are younger than you and far more trusting of you. If you have an idea and it's different from theirs, they generally assume you're probably right or know better or whatever.” However, as President of the sailing club, Dean found he was among peers and decision-making was different as it was shared among the members. “It was more of a group effort, decisions about what we were going to do, where we were going to go sail, and that type of thing.”

All of the cadets were heavily involved with groups prior to USMA and the majority held leadership positions. Barbara described being on the soccer team, serving as class president, and leading her Junior ROTC Battalion. Joe said being involved in groups was his “calling” and his “only way of feeling a part of something was through teams, or clubs, or sports, or something…being a part of a group and leading teams, actually being in those roles, was something that I felt comfortable in.” For Peter sports served as a way to make friends and push himself physically. He also stated that he “just kind of wanted a safe space, you know? Some space that you can feel comfortable…It helped that none of us knew each other because then we made friends faster.”

In Tim’s senior year he was captain of the varsity soccer team. He dealt with racial diversity on his team and the challenges with building a cohesive team.

We had a lot of Hispanic people on the team…there were just different cliques on the soccer team and so the biggest experience that I took away from being a captain of that team was you just got to find a way to make people interact with each other…they typically end up pretty segregated in a sense.

When arriving at the USMA Prep School, Joe found a racially diverse group.

I just realized I really loved that stuff. I really love being a part of a team, really just going at it with people. I love having that interaction with people. I love being challenged
with individuals. But at the same time, I wasn't in a leadership role because you're still just a cadet candidate at that point. But I enjoyed it…I really forced myself to try and go out and build bonds with people who weren't like me, which is something I really appreciated at the Prep School was the diversity.

**Developmental influences.** Tom’s parents played a big role in his development of a leadership identity.

One thing I did was Boy Scouts. I was an Eagle Scout…I got to hang out with a lot of my friends. My dad and my brother did it with me…I took a lot of cues from…my dad, definitely. My mom, too. I had two real strong parents.

Like Tom, many of the cadets mentioned the developmental influence of their parents. Heather served as chair for her student-run nonprofit organization focused on alleviating poverty in her state. She found the organizational skill level needed was well beyond what she could actually handle at the time. Although there was an advisor, Heather said her mother was the person she relied on most, “because she is a really great businesswoman…and the biggest example and motivator that I had.”

When Tom did not play a sport in his junior year of high school a USMA recruiter told him, “Play a goddamn sport”! Tom replied, "Yes, sir"! Tom joined the swim team his senior year and his coach said, "I know you joined the team as a senior, but I still expect you to be a leader as a senior.” Tom found great mentorship from the swim coach and affirmation of his leadership from his theater director. Tom was upset that the director gave the leading roles to the juniors, but his director sensed Tom’s frustration and said, “I still expect you to step up and help me control this group and just lead.” Tom said that “meant something” to him.
Most of the cadets had adults serve in the role as affirmers of their leadership abilities. These adults encouraged involvement and for these future cadets to take on leader roles. Donald joined the marching band junior year and the directors selected him and two others to serve as drum major in his senior year. Tim primarily interacted with his school’s administrative staff as student vice-president. “I wouldn't necessarily call myself a teacher's pet, but I was like social. I'd say pretty good skills at maintaining relationships with adults.” Tim was recognized as a leader in the school and received the principal's leadership award of excellence at graduation. Tim said that award made him feel “pretty accomplished.” When Grant spoke of his time in the Civil Air Patrol he said they “had one senior leader who was a retired master sergeant in the Army...people really just found it a worthwhile thing to come to…largely a credit to his ability.”

Wayne had glowing remarks for his hockey coach.

He would be tough on us, expect a lot from us, but at the same time show compassion, respect. That was the first time I ever came in contact with a person who could do both, because in my head, it was you're a good leader if you're really nice and you're soft and you take care of us and if you were hard on us and you expect a lot of us, you were a jerk. That was my perception of leadership when I was really young, but he did both and because of that, he was this third type of leader that I really had never seen before and obviously I've met many, many like that since, but he was the first person to get me thinking in those terms.

**Developing self.** John was involved in many sports and academic societies though he never had any formal leadership roles. He appeared to have a solid self-concept by describing himself as a pretty quiet kid who led by example. “I tried to do the right things…didn't go out to
parties. I did have a younger brother who was two grades below me, so I was just trying to be a good example for him and his friends.”

Heather was a three sport athlete in high school and exuded confidence. She believed her participation in teams and clubs helped prepare her for USMA. “I knew I could do the Army because I was a physically fit person. I had been captain of all those teams so I knew how to motivate an organization.” Grant also ran track and cross country. He stated he was

…an informal team captain my senior year. We had one team captain, it was just the fastest guy, but my coach asked me to be a leader on the team. He reserved that captain's spot for someone who is speedy...my coach did ask me, ‘Can you look after this group on the team, and make sure everyone is working hard?’ It meant a lot to me. I took that as my own responsibility, helping integrate the new guys on the team and get everyone a part of the program….Generally I always had a coach or a boss...notice that I'm a hard worker and that people just like being around me, so most of the time it was them asking, ‘Would you be willing to be the squadron commander or something like that? We noticed some characteristics in you that are positive and want others to exemplify that.’

Joe came through tough childhood years and was initially unsure of attending USMA because of its reputation as an elite institution. He was not sure if he was a right match for USMA. After discussing this opportunity with trusted mentors he determined, “I wasn't going to be coming here [USMA] just to fit in. I was coming here to make a difference…with my mentality, with my personality, with my upbringing…I could bring something different to the organization.”

Though a formal leader in many organizations in high school, Grant believed that though he had no legitimate source of power, he was a “good dude” who people respected. “I was just
looking for a chance to be a leader in a couple different things.” Peter grew up in a Chicago neighborhood “that wasn't the best to grow up in.” He headed off to military school in ninth grade. He saw the changes in himself and reflected that “if you act in a certain role, then you will kind of assume the role…I noticed that I started changing the way I talked and the way I presented myself…little things.”

**Changing view of self.** Barbara found that soccer was her “only positive leadership experience…they [the coaches] established values on the team, and we knew it was a dream team.” Donald stated his music directors “taught the ethical, moral…more abstract ideas of leadership and integrity…They were the influencers in my behavior.”

Dean, though team captain, remained dependent on his coaches. He stated he was “just a captain in the sense of help run practices, though, which I guess is valuable because the coaches ran everything…I didn't make any decisions as the captain of the wrestling team.” Dean had a similar experience with scouts where he remained dependent on adults. He described a gentleman who had “been running these camps forever and helping out with the Scouts forever.” Dean found himself dependent on this gentlemen. “I would go to him for a lot…He was the clear leader and I went to him the most.”

Rich had the least traditional path to USMA. He served in the Army as an enlisted Soldier in the Ranger Regiment. He stated that “they identified me early as sort of a young leader.” He was college educated so he considered himself “a smart Ranger, not a strong Ranger.” He viewed he had a “passive leadership style.” He stated he would ask others “do you mind doing this, or we got to get this done, but not giving any sort of deadlines, any sort of left and right limits.” After showing success in Ranger School and receiving praise from his
instructors, his confidence soared. He received positive feedback from the instructors after he adopted a more assertive approach to leading.

Ranger School, I really have to say, it really did give me that leadership foundation that I still rely on now. It's given me another tool that I can rely on that I can be passive, I don't have to be shouting at people or digging into them, but I can still be assertive in it… I felt confident that if I needed to get something done, I could be assertive enough to. Because I think that was my biggest problem leading up to Ranger School, was just assertiveness. Because my mom even recognizes it, all my friends from high school, just the confidence level went way up after it.

**Changing view of leadership.** Wayne found an older peer role model in a high school team captain.

I looked up to him as an older brother, as a model for my work ethic, as ways to conduct myself off the ice which was probably more important in the long run than how I played on the ice… The decisions that I made were directly influenced by how I felt as a freshman on the team influenced by a captain I looked up to. He was so mature in the way he conducted himself and he had very, very good perspective on what it meant to play hockey. The way he talked to the team was very respectful. He had a very good hold on the role hockey played in his life… I would have a lot of conversations with him on the side about what he was thinking about doing with his life… I thought it was very enlightening to see a man, in my opinion, who could put so much time and effort into loving the game of hockey and being a model for us on the ice, but also have goals and aspirations that were mature outside of the game of hockey. I really appreciated that… his maturity level heightened my maturity level. It required that I gain perspective on the
game and gain perspective on my work ethic and the way I conduct myself and the way that I was a leader for other people.

At the USMA Prep School Peter ran cross country and had a graduate assistant as his coach. This coach was just months removed from USMA. Peter stated that his “perspective of leadership” at that point in time was best represented by the movie *Full Metal Jacket* with “very firm, very strict, very up in your face” type leadership. He did not find that at all with his new coach. He found “she was the nicest person ever. She was very nice, no yelling whatsoever and I realized that sort of style of leadership worked because she would ask you to do something and you would want to do it.”

Many of the future cadets found themselves in that role of older peer and, by virtue of age, viewed as a leader. John stated that his high school team was factionalized so he found himself “an informal leader because not many seniors stayed on, especially not many seniors” like him. Dean also noticed when speaking to groups younger than him it served as “one of the first times where I really remembered that I was looked up to by younger people…I've never been so aware of the impacts that my actions and decisions, and the way I treated people, would have.” Like John and Dean, Tom found himself as an older member in a freshman heavy team. “I was still kind of a leader in the locker room…a lot of them looked up to me…helped me take on more of a leadership role on the team.”

Wayne might have summed up the experiences for the group when he said he “was very happy to see that West Point values leaders of clubs, captains of teams, and organizers of events because that is what leadership is.” He was seeing the interconnections between leadership and groups. “There are a lot of people who can get good grades and do a lot of push-ups…but to also
extend yourself [in leading groups]…I think is the most important thing you can do as a high school kid.”

**Early USMA Experiences**

Initial experiences at USMA appeared to delay movement toward a higher stage of development primarily due to the dramatic hierarchical nature of the Corps of Cadets. Allen and Cherrey (2000) described hierarchies as the “use of positional power to ensure action” and that the “sources of intelligence” come from the top of the organization (p. 46-47). Despite seeking leadership experiences prior to arriving at West Point, many of the cadets quickly learned to avoid contributing to the group in Cadet Basic Training (CBT). Heather stated that she

…was really intimidated coming into West Point…I felt smaller. I felt like my voice was just minuscule. I just felt very out of my comfort zone and a little bit out of my league…I was definitely very passive, very quiet, and didn't really take on a peer leadership role unless I was forced to….I was never the person to volunteer for anything during CBT.

Grant recognized the challenges of “going from being a senior in high school where you're top of the stack and everyone looks up to you to being lower than low, called ‘New Cadet,’ a relatively insulting term.” Donald added that he “really honestly did not enjoy CBT…I got along with everybody, and everybody, I feel like, got along with me…the people who had the [prior military] experience…those are the people who take leadership opportunities.” Barbara believed she “was more of a ghost in the company.” Sometimes the impact of CBT might extend too far and was best captured by Tim when he reflected back on his early years at USMA.

I never lost the ambition to try hard because I always valued being competitive and being one of the better ones. I want that. Academically, I've always pushed myself and if I wasn’t getting at least a 3.8 GPA, I wasn't doing it right. That's always stuck with me, but
as far as going out of my way I think joining clubs and things like that and trying to seek those types of [leadership] positions, I didn't really feel like it, I guess. I wanted to just go unnoticed. I think that's definitely taught at Beast [CBT]…You just want to stay undercover. Stay under the radar. I think I just held onto that a little bit.

**Group influences.** The strict hierarchical nature of the cadet company, especially Plebe year, led all cadets in the sample to view leadership at West Point as the person in charge is the one who does leadership and “the follower’s role is to do what the leader says” (Owen, 2012, p. 27). When each cadet was asked about leaders in CBT and the Academic Year companies they described a member of the hierarchical chain of command from squad leader through commander. There was never a mention or reference to a non-positional leader.

Tom described his CBT squad as cohesive and stated, “We owe a lot of that to our squad leader.” Tom keyed in on both of his squad leaders. He performed well for his second squad leader “because we wanted to be her...Do good for her because she cared about us.”

Tim found his second squad leader “significantly harder on us and would actually enforce a lot more of the standards, and expectations, and everything, yet, we still thought he was the greatest thing.” Tim and his squad mates were impressed with his squad leader’s awards. “He had the wreath and the star, and the GPB [German Proficiency Badge] and everything that to us was like, ‘Oh, wow. You must be some type of competent person to get all that on your chest.’”

Tim came to learn that this squad leader really cared about him and the members of his squad. The squad leader initially focused in on their physical training scores. “Really they weren't that awful, but to him anything below a 375 [maximum score] was awful.” The squad leader directed there would be no candy eaten from their Meals Ready to Eat. Tim stated that cadre could not withhold food from new cadets. “That's some type of punishment and that's not allowed. But it
got to the point where we would…stick up our candy…because we didn't want to disappoint him and we didn't want him to see us eating candy.”

Every cadet had a story about a member of the chain of command and most stories were positive, but not all. Donald found that one of his CBT details was “not, I guess, the model for leadership that I think West Point would have wanted. They weren't horrendous by any means, but I guess a lack of competence.”

The new cadets were drawn to each other. Heather found support in her roommates. She said she “got along really well with my roommates. I quickly gained a really close group of friends…built my confidence up from there.” Tom might have best captured the overall sentiment when he said, “it was a good group of guys who all came here for the right reasons…We just all got along. We had similar personalities…We came from all over the country, but we came here because we wanted to serve.”

The strict company environment led to the majority of cadets to look for relational opportunities outside the chain of command once the academic year commenced. Many found the desired relations on athletic teams. Each company had their own intramural sport teams and many cadets found relationships with older peers in this segment of the company environment. Barbara found that “in company athletics, they accept you; you get the whole first name basis thing, and all that other jazz. Then you kind of get to really learn about that class and who they really are.” Dean participated in company wrestling and “one of the coaches was my platoon leader and my platoon sergeant was on the wrestling team...I saw them very frequently, talked a lot. I got to know them very well; they got to know me well.” For John, company team handball provided enjoyment because he was
…able to interact with Firsties on a more personal basis, because you don't really understand that they're people, too, and being able to get to know what a leader is like offline, when they're not being formal, but being able to understand what they're like in a more relaxed setting, I think that was definitely valuable. They were just very welcoming and accepting.

Others found that the Company Sandhurst Team, a military skills sweepstakes program, enabled the older peer relationships they were looking to establish. Peter found Sandhurst a “sort of an elite team, and that appealed to me, too, because I like challenges.” Peter quickly found that it was the “culture of the team that we're all going to talk to each other as teammates…That really helped build those relationships of trust.” Heather also participated in Sandhurst and found that being on the team was “something unique that your classmates and company aren't necessarily going through. It's kind of cool because you get mentorship from the upperclassmen. You get one-on-one mentorship. You're like ‘This is awesome. I feel so special and important.’”

Other cadets looked beyond the company. Barbara joined the Jewish Choir despite not being a singer or Jewish. “I don't know why I did that, but they said it was a really cool activity that gets you out of West Point.” For Brandon it was his intercollegiate sport. He found that “sometimes it was just like a release thing. It's like, ‘Man, my company's been really hard on me today.’” He said when he would head to practice after a tough day in the company that he knew he would receive mentorship “without having to worry about a whole lot of barriers...They can tell you, ‘Hey man, I've been through that, too. This is how we can approach it. This is how it can get better.’”

Grant joined an intercollegiate club. He said his “platoon sergeant during Beast was a member of the team and she noticed I was pretty good at PT [physical training], pretty tall, and
she recommended that I try out.” However, he found that he felt a bigger draw to his company than to the club team. “I felt like I respected the upperclassmen in my company more than the team, because generally the upperclassmen on the team were kind of just unpleasant to be around.” Donald was initially drawn to the spirit band based on his high school experiences. However, since the drum line practiced away from the rest of the band he “felt like the cohesion wasn’t quite where I wanted to be… I didn’t feel like there was much of a connection… That’s actually what ended up driving me to try” a different club.

Wayne was trying out for a varsity sport, but was very drawn to his company. He said it was the company leadership that drove into the minds of the newly arrived cadets that they were part of a team and needed “to represent our team and our family because by virtue of being with us, being on our roster… you are responsible for being as prideful as you can, for being as much of a team player as you can.” This mentality appealed to Wayne. He found on his varsity team that

…there were definitely great aspects and there were definitely some aspects that I was disappointed in for sure. I valued my time on the team very much, but at the end of the day I felt like I was not a cadet because of the way that that team carried itself, because of the things that I was not part of due to being on the team. There were days where we’d go up to the locker room and hang out and I realized I’m missing drill practice and parades. I am one of probably four kids at this place who love that stuff… addicted to the idea of that kid on the poster, that awesome kid with the plume who was the poster kid, the poster child of the West Point name and that for me was what West Point was. Even the hardships of being a Plebe and when I explain this to people, people think I’m insane, but I love that. I honestly love that stuff and I loved it before I was at West Point and I loved
it as a Plebe. The fact that I was missing out on it, not being with my company, not being with the Plebes, really bothered me. Really, really bothered me to the point that I wouldn't say distanced me from the team, but my mentality was not congruent with and did not match up well with the mentality of other kids on the team.

**Developmental influences.** Early in the USMA experience cadets found influencers among staff and faculty, older peers, and classmates. The significant role that members of the staff and faculty played in the development of cadets during their USMA years will be covered later in this chapter. One example from Joe was an instructor who, after reading Joe’s essay about when he was a young boy he wanted a Kurt Warner jersey, but could not afford one. At the final lesson of the course, the instructor gave Joe a Kurt Warner jersey. “Something as small as that, being able to listen, being able to understand, and being able to make a difference in somebody that you're leading, that's something that really made a huge impact on me.”

Some cadets found older peer role models in leadership positions. Donald found his “team captain was together. Very, very high caliber person...He had this vision of…the perfect people. He wanted to come across as the perfect people, so he didn't really like when we weren't...he set the mood.”

Grant found role models on his Sandhurst team. He had seen his Sandhurst team Plebe year and thought participating would be good preparation for a future combat arms officer. “The prime reason why I left [my club team] was just to do Sandhurst.” So in his Yearling year his team captain for Sandhurst was the Regimental Executive Officer, a leader Grant admired. “Other seniors on the team were my company commander and also my first sergeant. He [first sergeant] especially looked out for us. He was a big mentor to me my whole Yuk [Yearling] year.”
Tim reflected back to CBT and his platoon sergeant. Tim’s CBT roommate had mononucleosis and his platoon sergeant “went out of his way to make sure that he got the proper nutrition and whatever he needed.” Tim found his platoon sergeant “very caring and overall a good person.” The platoon sergeant’s actions left such a mark that Tim left him a note at the end of CBT. “I wrote him a thank you note. It was an anonymous note. It just said, ‘Hey, Sergeant. I just want to let you know that you really changed my perspective on leadership.’” Heather had an influential platoon sergeant during the academic year. “This is who I want to be…He was just so invested in everything that was happening with our platoon. He knew everything about everyone and cared so much.”

A number of these future commanders looked to their company commanders for examples. Grant referred to his commander as an “extremely talented human being with a level head.” Peter found that his Yearling year commander “was one of those people that genuinely cared and you could tell by the way that she led, the way that she talked, the stuff that she did. She genuinely really cared about you and your development.”

Heather’s commander Plebe year was a charismatic leader. “He genuinely cared about everyone in his unit. I think that he made a genuine effort to...set the standard and there was no question that he was going to be a good officer…he was so invested in the company.” Early on Wayne was completely enamored with the role of company commander.

When I was a Plebe and I saw my CO doing the whole parade thing, I was like all I ever wanted to be was a CO. That was all I’ve ever wanted to be since I was a Plebe. I said that dude is awesome. My first CO I had was a woman, she was intense, she was amazing. My next CO was a man, he was amazing, also, and I said I want to be that, because that person is gold. That is the golden kid of West Point and that is who I want to be. I aspire
to be that because I love what that person embodies and what that person is and what he stands for.

Finally, many of the cadets had positive influence from their peers. Dean said he had “a couple of really, really good classmates.” These classmates pushed Dean to excellence. “We'd come up with the idea of checking weapons out of the arms room and doing PMI [pre-marksmanship instruction] on M9s or on AK47s or the MARK 19…Definitely being around guys so motivating…It just worked out well.” During CFT, Heather found a classmate who she believes is one of the best cadets to come out of USMA “because he's very good at teaching people how to do things, so any time I was fumbling through something…he was like, ‘All right, slow down, show me how to do it, you know how to do it.’”

John was positively influenced by his roommates. His two roommates attended the USMA Prep School. “They knew more like the military stuff. I was more a reserved person coming in, not a very loud or a person willing to open up or anything like that, and both of my roommates were very loud people.” His face lit up as he reflected on their experiences.

They loved to dance, and just sing, and just go out and do whatever. They were definitely a huge influence on me. I'm definitely a better leader having roomed with them. I think I'm a better person, kind of like them. I think just some of the things they exposed me to. They're just different. I come from a really rural farming community…These two guys, one came from Watertown, New York. He was a military brat, so he moved from all over the place. The other one, his dad was also in the Army and he kind of moved around. They just had much different life experiences than me. I don't know, they were just very influential people…you can tell they are natural-born leaders and you want to follow them.
Developing self. The developing self at this emerging stage focused on taking individual responsibilities and identifying skills needed to succeed. Heather had a chance to reflect on her strengths and weaknesses from her early USMA years during a recent course. The course required her to review her periodic development reviews, a multi-source assessment tool, for trends. “One of mine was that I am competent, but I struggle to convey that competence.” Heather shared that she thinks “that was honestly most evident during Buckner, because I would know how to do something, but I wasn't very good at conveying it, or I would get nervous right beforehand.” She found that with great peer support and confidence based on her Sandhurst experiences, she began “feeling more relaxed in the environment, I started doing a lot better.” Heather believed “all the areas that I was lacking…[putting] together an M240 or an M249…stuff that I felt self-conscious about during Beast because I had never been exposed to it…I suddenly actively began seeking out ways to become competent.” She said she became more physically fit and those “skills that had been very underdeveloped during Beast, I had suddenly kind of either been equal to or surpassed my peers in being able to do them. I felt kind of a surge of confidence.”

Joe’s confidence built when he was complimented by his platoon sergeant who said Joe had "a lot of leadership ability." Joe was a team leader at the time and his platoon sergeant was recommending him to serve as platoon sergeant the next semester. Joe believes they realized that he is “standing out amongst his peers in a leadership realm…let's give him even more responsibility.” Dean had a similar experience when during Yearling year his commander predicted that Dean “was going to be company commander” during senior year.

Wayne exuded confidence early in his first year. “I got this. I get this Plebe thing. It makes sense to me. I'm not having any trouble. I know what's expected of me and I'm doing my
best and I think I'm doing it pretty well.” He found in Plebe year that driving the van to home games for his athletic team was a big responsibility “because you're putting a lot of time into getting these vans and organizing the transportation and all that stuff.” As Wayne moved through Yearling year he picked up more responsibility. “I was in charge of the transportation…paying for the vans…logistics of the actual weekends and the games…I was in charge of scheduling which now that I know what it means to schedule anything is a nightmare.”

Tom probably had the best opportunity to lead while in his Plebe year. His brother was a graduate of USMA and told Tom it was important to try and get into an organization outside of the company. Tom unsuccessfully tried out for the Glee Club so ended up on the company wrestling team. “I had never wrestled before. I just got my butt kicked every day. I was not enjoying it…I need to get out of this. I need to find something.” Tom became a manager on one of the varsity teams. “I was like not really a huge fan of being a Plebe, so I'd like to get out and try something else. I'd like to be part of a team.” Tom hit it off with the Assistant Coach.

He identified me, for whatever reason, as being willing to do the tasks…a lot of the managers, I think, were there to get out of things rather than to have to do things. Within like two weeks he had made me head manager as a Plebe…which is interesting because I had three Yuks [Yearlings] from my own company that I was in charge over. I don't know. He just kind of took me under his wing. Just gave me a lot of responsibility. I was used to [this responsibility] before West Point, but I wasn't used to as a new cadet, first semester plebe. That experience was good for me…I've got some responsibility…Being that head manager…was an opportunity I don't think a lot of Plebes have…I think he [coach] identified me as being a more natural leader.
**Changing view of self.** Though the cadets came to West Point with a significant resume of leadership experiences, in their first two years at the Academy the cadets had very little opportunity to lead in organizations. Besides Tom’s and Wayne’s experiences with their teams, most cadets found themselves in the role of follower.

Rich was a prior-enlisted Soldier in the Ranger Regiment. He “particularly remembered” his first cadet platoon sergeant in the academic year company. Rich thought he and his platoon sergeant “did not see eye-to-eye.” His platoon sergeant was a very aggressive leader and Rich was convinced the chain of command purposefully assigned him to that platoon. “I don't deal with someone yelling at me...That was his sort of style. I didn't particularly respond to it. Unfortunate, being the subordinate, I know how this works. I just got to do it.”

John reflected on CBT and shared that his squad leader did not really care about the squad. “He didn't seem to care about us much. He was almost never there, which is something I told myself if I became a Beast squad leader, I would try to be there for my squad all the time.” It appears John and his squad mates were dependent on the squad leader. “He was never there…never really tried to teach us…It seemed like this was more of a fun opportunity or something that he needed to get done, rather than really taking a hold and trying to teach us something.” Wayne found that “the leaders I liked the most were the ones that I was afraid of but at the end of the day I respected. The ones that I knew expected a lot from me.”

Tom also remembered his tough leaders. Speaking of his CBT First Sergeant, Tom found him stern. “We were all not as much terrified of him, but just like when he was around we all locked up. We didn't want to disappoint him. He wasn't mean or anything. He was just very disciplined.” Tim respected his squad leader. “I didn't want to disappoint my squad leader and that was what it came down to his leadership was really effective to the point where we would
just do things because we didn't want to let him down.” His squad leader would teach him and the other new cadets. “I think it came down to the fact that you could tell he was very competent and, at least to us, it appeared that he was good at everything that he did.” Tim attributed the fact that his entire squad was still at USMA years later to the leadership of this CBT squad leader.

Grant and his club teammates became dependent on a coach. He referred to her as “a task master, a slave driver…very much focused on performance…the whole empathy factor was lower, so she was really good at getting us to do things, just mostly because we didn't want anything unpleasant as a result.” Grant eventually left the team.

John experienced that dependency on the leader when looking to his platoon leader at Cadet Field Training. “This platoon leader did not like the company commander, so they didn't communicate a lot. We would run into a lot of situations where we're late for stuff, or we're not getting food, or we're not getting sleep.” John and his classmates did not actively try and influence a positive outcome. “I mean, we griped, obviously; complained to the commander; and made jokes about him [platoon leader], because he was just very incompetent.” In the eyes of John the positive outcomes for the platoon clearly rested with the platoon leader.

Peter spoke of a time when he was a team leader and the cadet he was in charge of was struggling. “I was trying to talk to him. He said, ‘No, I'm not talking to you; I'm going to go to bed.’” This response from his team member infuriated Peter. “I was like, ‘No, you are not! We are having this conversation right now.’ So we got into an argument and midway through he started crying.” Peter found this cadet was going through a rough time at USMA. Peter was moving from a dependent to independent view of self – he became the leader. “That was one of the most memorable moments of me being a team leader.” Peter knew he had to show him that he cared. “You got to be in that role. You just got to really show him that you care and show
him...you're willing to do things that are not pleasant to get them to be successful.” Peter found he was responsible for the cadet and for his performance. “I was responsible for his well-being, for his success, for his failures and I really genuinely wanted him to be successful. When I saw that he wasn't trying it bothered me.” Peter believed his team member was dependent on him for leadership.

Wayne might have wrapped up the early years at USMA for the future commanders’ view of themselves as either dependent or independent when he reflected on his CBT experience. If a leader gets that motivation out of a subordinate, out of a person he or she is leading, I think that's pretty great. Inspiring the best out of your kids, out of the people that you're in charge of. My first detail platoon sergeant…I remember whenever he talked to me I was terrified, but not so terrified where it would prevent me from doing my best to ensure that he felt highly of me and to gain his approval was huge for me, because I really looked up to him. He was tough as nails…Which I think is why it's important for those leaders to be right and know what right is so that your people who follow you, can believe in your vision of what right is. I very much believed in what he stood for among many other things, he was the symbol. He was the peak leader of my Beast experience, for sure.

**Changing view of leadership.** During Plebe year Wayne was asked to start a large-scale tutoring program since he was a tutor in high school. Wayne was not ready to move into the leader role at that time. “I realized I preferred tutoring to creating a tutoring system, because once I was in charge of it at a higher level, I guess, I was not tutoring anymore.” He found he was not enjoying the role. He said, “Once you get up there and you get in the decision-making realm...Maybe equally fulfilling, but less fun. You don't get that face-to-face fulfillment, that everyday energy that you get from interacting with people.”
Dean had a unique experience on his company athletic swim team that gave him a glimpse of his changing view of leadership away from a leader-centric view. “The team was a bunch of non-swimmers…Our coach didn't know anyone on the team…watching the team grow, literally it was like out of a movie. The team just grew closer and everybody was getting better at swimming.” Dean was not viewing that the goal of this team was to win, but to allow non-swimmers to become better swimmers. “Everybody just fell into a role, ‘Hey, I'll do this stroke if you'll do this stroke this race’. We actually worked during practice, which we actually could have gotten away with not working...personalities working well together.”

Rich and John both experienced very early in their cadet careers that holding a leadership position does not make one a leader. Rich found that when his squad leader was grading them he assigned grades “purely off of personal relationships. I remember specifically in his grade counseling for me it was like, ‘You're sort of grumpy all the time, not really outgoing and positive.’” Rich resented this counseling and grade. He said, “I need to be competent. I can do my job, and I can teach you how to do your job.” Rich was still frustrated by this experience years later. John found that his CFT “squad leader didn't do Buckner herself…She didn't really know what she was doing. We had a lot of high speed people in our squad who knew what they were doing, so we kind of looked to them.” Though John ended the conversation with a leader-centric response when he said, “Obviously, she would have the final say, but I mean, didn't really respect her as a squad leader.”

Joe had a unique insight into the role of leaders and leadership. He experienced as a Plebe member of a sports program a team-wide conduct violation. “I had known that some of my teammates hadn't gotten the same punishment…people that were going to be Firsties. I feel like a Firstie should be way more accountable than a Plebe.” Joe was starting to view that with
authority comes responsibility and “If you're going to be Captain of the team, and this is what's occurring…there's kind of a flaw in the system…shouldn't he be held more accountable than I am?”

In these early years, this sampling of cadets were drawn to different groups, viewed older peers as leaders, and were dependent on these leaders for quality of life, but they started to see that just serving in a position of leadership did not make one a leader. As the cadets closed out their early years at USMA, Wayne set the stage for what is to come in the final two years as these cadets looked to take on significant leadership roles.

In my interviews to come to West Point, everyone's asking me why do you want to go? I said there's no better team. People talk down about locker room talk a lot and while I agree with that a lot, there is an aspect of the locker room, this symbolic locker room…that is rare to find outside of West Point. I did not apply to the Naval Academy, I did not apply to Air Force, because I was not convinced that they were promoting the same level of togetherness and brotherhood and sisterhood that this place did. When you're talking about companies, my first company, my first impression of what it meant to be a family. That was a great, great example.

Later USMA Experiences

The last two years at USMA found the cadets immersed in leader-centric views of leadership and readying themselves to move from a hierarchical approach to leadership to a more systems approach.

Group Influences. Peter was back at the Prep School, this time as a USMA cadet squad leader leading the cadet candidates in summer training. Traditionally all squads compete to win in various events over the summer. Peter made a decision on the Land Navigation Course to
utilize different members to find points. He made the decision that instead of going to all the points that they were going to head back once he met the training outcomes. Peter received some push-back from members of the squad who wanted to win. Peter told them, “This isn't about you. It's about everyone and making sure that they get a meaningful experience.” Though Peter had some rough patches in leading his organization, he said “by the end of the detail my squad was the one that ended up with the most leadership positions” among the newly formed cadet candidate chain of command. He felt justified in his methods.

Tim found when he was a squad leader in CBT that the leader training program was critical to his team’s success. “Those two weeks I think are invaluable…Building a cohesive team amongst a CO, first sergeant, platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and then the four squad leaders. Really invaluable getting that time together to just kind of build a culture.” Tim was realizing how his squad fit into this larger company organization. Tim parlayed that learning experience to when he was company commander and built his team with the goal of finishing number one in the regiment. He believed he needed to build a cohesive team and if the company had no sexual harassment cases, no alcohol boards, and no academic failures they could consider themselves successful. John took a different approach as commander. He focused on the developmental programs of USMA. “The first three pillars are pretty easy, you know, academic, military, physical. That's what we get graded on, so I figure West Point thinks that's something important to measure, so that's what we're going to do.”

Wayne and Grant were tremendously influenced by their clubs. Wayne described his club as “unique” and though he said he had no data to support his claim, he felt that the cadets on his team were empowered to lead. “This was not my coach's team. This was not our OIC's [officer in charge] team. This was our team.” Grant, as a founding member of his club, started it mostly as a
social club. He figured this was a “cool thing we can do that is a chance to make people happy by getting some good food out of the mess hall, a little break…giving us the chance to develop our social pillar.” The club grew and they had “the chance to learn how to cook the food, understand the logistical process and stuff like that. We set up our club leadership in the form of a battalion staff.” Grant and his classmates feel ownership of the club, but as they prepare to graduate they are planning for the club’s continuity as they leave USMA. “We have three very strong Yearlings and Cows that we should be able to count on that will keep it alive.”

Tim and Rich used the social interactions surrounding meals to help influence and be influenced by their company. Tim sat at Table 38C his Cow year with influential members of all classes where they discussed the happenings in the company. “I still sit at the table today…we have these Yearlings that sat at the table with us so they were Plebes last year when they sat there with us.” The discussions focused on improving the company. Rich also was looking for “that open line of communication…as a leader, you need to be able to take criticism, good or bad. Really, I look for the bad. I want to hear what I'm doing wrong.” Rich focused on the Cow and Yearling class on his table. “The Yuks are a little more seasoned than the Plebes, they have sort of an idea of how West Point works, but they're still junior enough that they're not totally bought into one thing or another.” Regarding the Cows, he was viewing them as his replacements. “You've been here for two years, you've been affirmed, and you’re not going anywhere now. What do you want to see for your year? Can we start doing it now?”

Peter felt the satisfaction that comes from being positively influenced by a group. I passed by a group of Plebes and they were all sitting at a table together and I just went to go sit by myself…all these Plebes picked up their trays and walk towards me. They're like, ‘Hey, Sir. Can we sit down and join you?’ I was like, ‘Sure.’ They're like, ‘Yeah, we
noticed you were eating here by yourself so we wanted to come join you.’…At that moment, all the stress that I was going through as a company commander, all the late nights that I was doing, all the complaining, all the headaches that I was going through with the battalion commander, even down to people not completing their stuff, at that moment everything seemed worth it.

**Developmental influences.** USMA provided plenty of opportunity for these cadets to lead and serve as members in groups.

Peter used his time as a summer squad leader to practice a new style of leadership. “I liked it because you got to do multiple leadership styles throughout the detail. We started off with R-Day [Reception Day], where you have to be that type-A confrontational person. At first I was very uncomfortable with yelling.” Peter related that one of the civilian supply clerks who gave out uniforms saw his “less than mean” approach to the arriving cadet candidates. “She's like, ‘What are you doing’? And I'm like, ‘What?’ And she's like, ‘That's not how R-Day is supposed to be… I want you to be mean.’”

Peter adopted this type of leadership style into his repertoire. “It was kind of hard for me because I wasn't used to that…So throughout the whole rehearsal thing I started practicing that role and by the time actually R-Day came in I was good at it.” Peter feels that “if there is a situation that requires me to be that way I am not afraid to be that person. I'm just not naturally that person.”

Most of the cadets utilized academic coursework to develop their leadership. Referencing PL300, *Leadership*, the core course that all cadets take in junior year, Tom found he “definitely learned a lot from that class. Just like the science behind team building and stuff like that.” John learned terms. “Servant leadership, I learned that term. I knew that's what I wanted to do, but I
guess I was able to put a term to it.” As John reflected on his experiences he realized that he had been doing leadership taught in PL300. “I recognized myself doing it during Beast, but I didn't realize I was doing it. I guess it just made me more aware of what I was doing which was good so I can apply that to other situations.”

Not sticking with the traditional leadership course as his guide, Grant applied unique courses to his leadership development experiences. He used a Marketing course and a Human Resource Management course as they “were probably the biggest two that I was able to draw on.” Grant stated that “the big core principle that they teach you is, ‘A business exists to satisfy the customers’ needs and return a profit’...I shared that framework…and I was like, ‘The need that we're trying to satisfy is everyone’s success.’” The company leaders decided that “what we're going to do is make our staff and our leadership structure focus on promoting individual success…rotate [it] back into the team, so it's a perpetual feedback loop, so the strong people help the others become stronger.”

Joe felt empowered when his TAC charged him “with trying to help him figure out who's going to be the new First Sergeant next semester for the company.” The Tactical Officer was treating Joe more as a colleague. John found that “as you go through West Point, the instructors start to seem more as a fellow human being, and not treat you as a cadet. They'll talk to you, and be more honest with you.”

Wayne attended Crossroads Africa prior to assuming command. This eight week program to Ghana proved tremendously meaningful in Wayne’s development.

When I got there we were embedded with…an African NGO [non-governmental organization]…teaching people how to farm and not hurt the environment and make money at the same time…I was stunned, I had no idea what to do…I ended up being the
project manager…I don't even have to go into the culture shock, but just the leadership I had in that one niche assignment…The best leadership, the most effective leadership, the most meaningful leadership is people based…It is the quality of people and the work ethic and the team environment that gets stuff done, that accomplishes good things…The ability for people to mesh together…the language barrier, the cultural barrier…I have not seen a harder working team in my life at any one project ever than this group of 15 to 20 men, women, children…Their understanding of what it meant to be a part of a team, their connection they had with their family, with their friends, with their coworkers, with other peoples' families. I mean, that's what a team is. That is the epitome of a team and a person who has the honor of leading that team is responsible for creating that and expanding that as much as possible.

**Developing self.** Almost all cadets pushed to serve as Cadet NCOs. Tom stated that he “wanted to be a platoon sergeant, but I got to be a squad leader. I think I realized that I wanted to be more active and present in the company.” John was “itching to go back to a leadership position ever since Beast.” Grant was assigned as a Summer Leader Experience (SLE) squad leader. He believed SLE did not sound “like that great of development.” He put a request on his class Facebook page to see if anybody would be willing to “trade their CFT 1 squad leader spot for SLE” and he said classmates responded immediately. “SLE is not rather field intensive … comfortable, so I arranged a trade.”

Not all wanted to serve as Cadet NCOs. Rich said he “didn't really want one, to be honest. Their administrative positions, there's not a whole lot of opportunity to be an NCO, or very few, or very rare opportunities to actually be an NCO, especially here.” Rich who had spent time in the Army prior to USMA stated, “We're not an NCO Academy. We're a commissioning
source. We're making officers.” When pressed on the leadership value of serving as a Cadet NCO, Rich replied, “Maybe it's just me undervaluing that time, but I made the conscious decision to not pursue being a squad leader or platoon sergeant. Personally, I didn't see a lot of value in it for me, at least.”

Donald was selected to serve as a staff NCO during Cadet Summer Training. He was not happy with that selection for him; however, what he experienced provided him a great vantage point for future leadership roles.

I got to see a lot of commander update briefs and that sort of stuff…that's where I started to understand how the higher up leaders make the big picture decisions and how that trickles down into what ends up happening to us. I guess it's a broad idea, broad goal...I got to see the inner workings of a large scale organization. Like, this is a big mission. I got to see everybody who was working towards that goal, and I got to interact with all the different thought processes and the people, you could tell the people who were trying to plan stuff. They have so much going on in their head, but they still get it done. I guess I got to see the inner-workings; I got to pop up the hood. Everything that makes the car work, I got to see it all. I didn't remember everything in detail, but I got to see and truly appreciate it.

Grant was able to reflect on his time in command. He was led to believe a company commander should not be doing the work. “You're there with the people helping out, but your prime role is to facilitate other people making the big picture happen. That was a big challenge for me; I told you that I'm a big doer.” He was starting to struggle with the expected roles of Cadet NCOs and Cadet Officers. He found the officer role “was kind of going hands off, talk big picture, then realizing as a CO I wanted to be present at all the bad things…It's good to place
yourself there at the friction points.” He believed his role included helping “to make things a little bit less bad, and then also we focused really big on recognizing success, the positive things. Anyone that did well, I would try and personally congratulate them.”

**Changing view of self.** John maintained an independent view of the organization and viewed his “key people” as the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants. However, he also “knew who the different cliques in each group were, because I'd been in the company. I could go to those people and be like, ‘Hey, we're doing this. Make sure you're there. Come support the company.’” John had become savvy enough in his leadership that he “could go to them and get them there, and they'd pull their groups in. I mean, being in the company for three years, I knew who those people were.”

Peter looked to build a “family environment where people weren't scared to hold each other accountable. You feel comfortable enough to make corrections, yet at the same time you also respect each other, that there's a boundary between being friends and being peers.” Joe found that sometimes the leader development program “does a good job of helping you grow into your own. Sometimes it doesn't. I think since it's so structured…that everybody's supposed to have these same ideas and same values…there still has to be an individuality aspect.” Joe believes that with uniformity “sometimes you take away from what could be.”

Wayne’s view of self with others is that “understanding people and understanding relationships and understanding what a team is and how a team works and how to motivate a team and how to inspire a team and how to deal with team issues.” With his time leading in Africa and with his club and company those “understandings” are what the process has been for him. “Not the wins or the losses and the logistical crap that we bounced back and forth on, but
it's the challenges and the hardships and the successes and the adventures that people had done together is what it is about.”

**Changing view of leadership.** Joe fought an assignment as a supply sergeant for his summer detail. “I viewed it as necessary, but not necessary for me. I thought what guy do I know that would like to be a supply sergeant?” Joe found that he was defining “success based off those around” him. Joe believed supply sergeant was “a petty job, like a second-hand job compared to Squad Leader. Squad Leader, you're in it. You're leading people.” Joe started realizing that logistics is significant to organizational success. “It really changed my mind on leadership roles, because not only did I have logistics to take care of, once we got the Yearlings, the Yearlings still wanted that interaction with somebody who'd been through CFT.” Joe found that the Yearlings started to talk to him, despite him not serving is a position of leadership. “I'd see a couple of them struggling with their rifle or gear…even as a supply sergeant you're still able to step in…because I know how to do it. I realized that you can learn something from just about anybody.”

Tim came into West Point with the idea that the USMA experience really wouldn't change him. “I am who I am. I didn't want to lose my compassion. I didn't want to lose my sense of humor, those things.” He had a special person in his life who had said, ”You really have to be careful because I don't want you to lose who you are, lose things that make you. I don't want you to become this robotic-type of person." Yet, he found USMA did change him “in all the right ways in my opinion as far as I've learned what's important and what's not.” Tim said when he “came here at the beginning I wouldn't expect things of people, but now I learned especially being a CO that what really it comes down to you can totally expect things of people.” He found if he let the other cadets know what he expected of them “then 9 times out of 10 they're going to
do that because they don't want to let you down, but that stems from having that relationship where it would matter to them if they did let you down.”

Peter wrapped up this section with that he “predominantly focuses more on if you make relationships with people and make them want to listen to you, that's more effective than just being that leader on the stage that's like, ‘Hey, do this, do that’, and only go to them when you need something from them.” Many of these cadet leaders wanted to lead and viewed organizations as leader-centric.

**Reaching Interdependence**

One of the research questions asked if cadets recently out of command and not in a formal leadership position do they view their role in the company differently? How do others view their role? Do the former commanders see that non-positional leaders can exercise leadership? The USMA experience for this sample of cadets appeared to reinforce a leader-centric view and thereby delay cadets from fully reaching interdependence.

Dean, describing his role in the company post command, stated, “I'm just there. I'm just around. I've had some people come up to me…to say something to the current Company Commander…I'm like, ‘No guys, I can't. Sorry. You guys bring it up yourself, it's not my place.’"

Other cadets in the study used the phrase “step back” when talking about their role in the company following command. Tom said, “It's difficult that I'm not in charge, that I can't affect things. I mean I can give them advice. I try and step back and let them do their own thing. It's tough.” Tim explained that he was the spirit officer “which is definitely like a step back…but, there is still a decent amount to do…homework…read books…naps…I go to the gym every day.” Finally Peter related that he tried “to take a step back. I am not too involved with the
company in terms of holistic view because I want the new CO to have the type of environment he's fostering.”

John might have best captured the sentiment of these former company commanders as they struggled with their new roles in the group. They viewed themselves as informal leaders, but lacked positional authority.

I can see myself as an informal leader in the company. I'm not having as many people stop by my room needing stuff, but I'll still have people come by my room asking me questions. The new CO will ask my advice on stuff. I'll also offer my advice, even when it's unsolicited, just if I see him doing something wrong or if I see the first sergeant doing something wrong, I'll be like, ‘Hey, you might want to try this.’… People still come to me asking for advice and stuff like that. Not quite as much as before, because I don't have any sort of command authority to make stuff change or happen.

However, even while in command the cadets appeared keenly aware of when they were in charge and when they were not in charge. John joined his company’s wrestling team as a Firstie, but clearly deferred to his coach, a classmate, to run the team.

Coach was very knowledgeable; he was a very outgoing person. He likes to teach people, he likes to take care of people, a lot like I do. I kind of just let him do his thing, and I'm not going to micro [pause] I'm not the coach on the team, I'm not the captain. I just let him do it. I'll show up on time, he tells me this is when I'm fighting…I let him take lead. It wasn't my place, I wasn't the leader. I was just a member on the team.

This comment above came from a sitting cadet company commander while participating on one of his company sport teams. In another example, Donald, a sitting commander who also had the simultaneous privilege of serving as an Academy sports team captain, believed that the
officers were in charge of his sports team and he had little influence, despite being team captain and a senior leader in the corps. He stated that “somebody ended up getting removed from the team, who arguably shouldn't have been removed, and as a cadet, it wasn't my decision to kick him off the team, it was the [officer] staff's decision which obviously is going to override mine.”

One experience where cadets view leadership as positional appears most prominent is the three-week Cadet Leader Development Training (CLDT) which occurs during Cadet Summer Training in their final two years. This training rotates cadets in and out of challenging leadership roles. When Tom was no longer in a leadership role at CLDT he found,

It was a challenge. I did not like not being in charge. Towards the end it was nice once I got my grades in. You know they're like ‘hey you're MOS [member of squad]’. I'm like ‘sweet.’ I'll just go pull security and not worry…They [classmates] really struggle with the peer leadership aspect of it. Look, I've been doing this all semester. It was a real struggle for me to sit back and watch them make mistakes and not jump in and take over because I was in my role as an MOS or team leader, whatever…I knew that I had to sit there and let them learn. That was a struggle constantly switching in and out, because ideally I'd like to at least be a squad leader if not more making those calls. Not a, you know, watching other people make mistakes.

The trainers reinforced that it is the leader who is in charge. Barbara, while serving as a platoon leader, was walked around the patrol base with a cadre member and saw that “there's all these people sleeping and stuff like that.” Barbara wondered how it was her responsibility to keep them all awake. The officer cadre member told Barbara, "It doesn't matter. You're the platoon leader. You're ultimately responsible for the whole platoon's doing, so you need to come up with a plan of how to keep people awake.”
Rich found comfort in the trainer’s view of the primacy of the positional leader’s role. Given Rich’s background as an Army Ranger he was always looked to by his peers for expertise in tactical situations. When one classmate serving as CLDT platoon leader asked Rich for help with an operations order, Rich stated, "Look, I'm not going to do your brief for you. I'm not going to do your order for you…You come to me with something, and I'll tell you what I think, but I'm not going to do it for you." Rich was positively recognized for this response by a trainer who heard the interchange and shouted, "Yes, thank you. Someone gets it. Do it on your own. This is your patrol."

A number of cadets found the practice of rotating cadets in and out of leadership positions useful to overall development. Heather, who went through CLDT during her Cow summer, said she initially received pushback from Firsties who just kind of rolled “their eyes at me…I think the good thing about CLDT is that everybody switches leadership roles…when it came time for them to be squad leader, I tried to give them the respect that I had wanted.” She found that the next time she was in charge that nobody had any issue and she felt the sentiment changed from eye-rolling to "Okay, I saw that was kind of hard and now I'm much more willing to be a willing participant.”

This transformation of cadets willing to participate in team success did not happen in all cases. Peter found that when he was not assigned as the leader the scenario played out very different. When asked to assist, he always said, “Okay sure, I'll help you out,” but “when it was my turn to be in leadership positions, sometimes it would be rainy or something, they would be in a bad mood and would be like, ‘No man, go tell someone else.’”
Grant may have placed this leader-centric dynamic in clearer context. There is an expectation that cadet leaders have their shot at leading and must experience it without the complete benefits of the team-building that occurred prior to their assuming leadership.

I'm the company store officer, so very simple, minute piece of the company, but still have random Yearlings or Cows come around asking for advice...It's definitely a strange dynamic being in the company. My battalion TAC had offered me and wanted me to be the battalion executive officer, but I didn't think it was [pause] I view these, the roles that people have here, as a chance to develop and I don't think that I've by any means reached the peak of my development, but I wanted someone else to have that chance to be that role, as opposed to me...it would be kind of selfish, is how I view it....I'm just trying to be a good example with what I do. Everyone saw who I was, and that I'm still the same person. I try and support the chain of command in all that they do, but also a big thing for me is I have to be hands off and let them do their thing...They have to learn the system themselves, and if I'm doing it for them then they are not going to get the same benefit that I did. Really, I think the biggest role I can play is this friend, mentor, coach, but not really anything that's...I'm not a formal leader anymore.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Joe, but maybe a little more direct. Joe found he did his platoon leader mission in CLDT and then rotated into a rifleman position. “How do I make my impact throughout the whole time? How do I make sure that I'm not just a leader when I'm PL [Platoon Leader] and then when I'm a rifleman I'm just kind of, I'm around”? Joe was struggling with this concept of only positional leaders do leadership. He said, “You have to make sure you're a leader all the time. That's what I expect of people in company life.” He explained a situation at CLDT where he helped a cadet who was struggling in a leader position.
‘Hey, take a couple deep breaths. We're here for you. If you need our help just let us know. Don't try to do this alone’. Then she gathers herself and comes up with a really good plan. It's executed really well. It's just things like that that I think cadets sometimes forget to do because we convince ourselves that since it is order of merit on a lot of things, there's a lot of competition. I got to be better than this person. I got to be better than that person. At the end of the day, if I bettered you and you bettered me, the Army's all better for it. The Corps is all better for it.

At USMA, the cadet order of merit is driven by their scores in academics, military, and physical. The order of merit drives whether a cadet gets their branch of choice and their desired first duty assignment. Joe went on to expound a little on the culture at USMA from his perspective. He used as an example a particularly talented cadet.

Even for his position, just hasn't done a whole lot of developing which is sad because somebody like him, who has all this potential, why isn't he doing it [developing others]? He has such huge potential to make this impact, but he doesn't do it because he's so concerned on how he looks on paper when it comes time to select him for Grad school, or give him a post, or even branch. Yes, that's great. I'm proud that this guy has an opportunity to go to Grad school after graduation. I'm proud this guy has an opportunity to go to Fort Bragg. I'm proud that he got the branch and post he wants, but at what expense?

Keeping the theme of individual performance as paramount, Joe took a step back and reflected on the role of a senior at USMA.

You could have done a lot of different things throughout your time this semester. Maybe your class rank would have suffered 10 slots, 20 slots. Okay, but maybe you just helped
push 10 or 20 cadets to a level that they wouldn't have achieved without you which is what leadership is. Some people think there's a roof or there's some level that they can't reach. A leader's job is to help them realize that you can reach that. I'll help you get there. All of a sudden that breeds new confidence and they say, ‘I can do this. I can continue to grow. Now I learned from that experience and I go teach somebody else how to continue to grow’...I just feel like sometimes people don't do that at the Academy because it's a ‘dog eats dog world’. As much as we like to say, ‘Oh, we're a team. We're a brotherhood’. Which we are, and it's the biggest fraternity/sorority, whatever you want to call it, in the world. As much as you do get the team values through competitive sports, at the end of the day, when you go back to your room and you're studying something, it [individual performance] trumps a lot of different things.

Trustable and Confident Leaders

One of the research questions inquired into what prior experiences did cadets believe best prepared them to serve in the role of company commander? In what ways were the cadets challenged and supported as cadet commanders? The third finding is that a majority of cadets found that it was while serving in select leadership positions over peers when they first realized they could not do it all and they started to develop themselves as more trusting and confident leaders.

All USMA cadets have the opportunity to serve as a squad leader; however, this sample of cadets did not view the squad leader position as particularly challenging, mostly since it did not include any peer leadership. Dean stated that “no one asks the squad leaders to do anything.... Squad leader is a job where you can do nothing or you can make a little something of it...I did not go super above and beyond as squad leader.” Grant found that the trend is that
platoon sergeants have more challenges than the squad leader when building a cohesive team.

“Being a platoon sergeant, you have to track all these different things. That was probably my favorite cadet leader experience, or actually maybe not. It was the hardest one that I had.” Joe saw that a platoon sergeant needed to have more presence. “With squad leaders, you have two team leaders…That's all I have to take care of…[as platoon sergeant] I got four squad leaders [classmates] plus my interaction with my platoon leader.”

Barbara stated that “it seems like every single task that came down was for some reason the platoon sergeant's responsibility. Not the staff. It's their job, but they want the tracking to go to platoon sergeants.” When she reflected back she exclaimed “Oh, gosh…it was developmental…not a fun time…for my friendships and relationships…because at the end of the day I had to do the right thing. I had to meet the standards. I got criticized all the time.” Tim found challenges with serving as a platoon sergeant, especially when leading older peers. “I was the headquarters platoon sergeant [have senior cadets in platoon] and so that was kind of like herding cats…it was like second semester…the Firsties were kind of like checked out and so that was kind of painful.”

Heather found her platoon sergeant time particularly meaningful.

I think I was learning the skills to being a better leader. I think I've always been naturally inclined to enjoy leadership, and I like mentoring and I like accomplishing goals with a group of people, but I think this [serving as a platoon sergeant] was teaching me the role of confidence, the role of communicating, the role of delegating, and stuff like that. How to be a better leader instead of just flailing through it like I was in high school….I think I was taking on more roles…I was platoon sergeant first semester. I had learned a lot about maintaining standards and discipline, the importance of it…I don't think I totally
knew yet how to be a platoon sergeant. I knew how to do managerial skills, I knew how
to track things, that was easy. I can make an Excel document and put information in it, I
can totally do that. What was different was peer corrections, especially some of the
bigger peer corrections, people that were consistently wrong and I had to discipline
them…I think I attribute being a platoon sergeant here to being one of my biggest growth
periods…I think I gained a lot more confidence as far as making corrections of other
people, but also showing people that I cared about them.

Grant served as a platoon sergeant at the same time he was serving as a leader on his
company Sandhurst Team and the Cadet in Charge (CIC) of an Academy Club.

That was the first time I really came to a good realization, like, that you can do too many
things, and it's very possible to over commit yourself…[I] didn't sleep much, and that was
not good. It was bad for my health, bad for just everything across the board. My grades
suffered…crucible moment in my time at West Point…I found it to be a little bit less
fun…[I] didn't really understand the whole organizational leadership stuff, too well, then.
I just tend to do everything myself…Eventually I was able to get with my peers that were
also in that leadership team, and assign them, ‘You're going to do this, you're going to do
this, and you're going to do this’, which basically, by the end, took a lot of work off of me
which allowed me to then reorient everything else. I learned some good delegation skills
through doing that CIC of that club…I understood the idea of delegation.

Donald enjoyed the relational aspects of leadership. “I ended up being a platoon sergeant.
I was really excited to be a platoon sergeant…I really wanted to show my leadership
potential…The main thing I wanted to emphasize was I guess taking care of the fourth class.”

However, Donald found that his inability to manage all assigned tasks impacted his chance to
exercise relational leadership. “One of my biggest issues was not delegating…I did not do a good job delegating tasks…I should have held my squad leaders more accountable. That would have let me focus on the interpersonal interactions more.”

As a company executive officer at Cadet Field Training, Rich found the company succeeded because the company commander “really empowered the PLs… he was a company commander, came up with a vision…guided the platoon leaders where he wanted them to go.” Rich determined that “after seeing how well sort of delegating all this planning to the platoon leaders could be, that's what I did going into the school year as a company commander.” Tim also served as an executive officer in Cadet Basic Training. He found that “none of us have an idea of what an XO is, especially in the summer…The communication was really hard…logistical stuff…was just like a nightmare.”

As the cadets transitioned to company commander roles their experiences in leadership positions such as platoon sergeant and executive officer helped them as commanders. Tim stated that his platoon sergeant time impacted how he would be a CO, “I realized more so than ever that I needed that referent power; especially with them [Firsties] because I didn't have legitimate power…I would have to build up my relationships before I could actually tackle it.” Dean found he was able to handle the platoon sergeant role fairly easy, but was then challenged as a commander.

This was a flaw I found in my leadership style in the beginning…I tried to do a lot of stuff on my own. I definitely overburdened myself. In high school, there wasn't much put on you, I could handle it all…Even in the beginning as a platoon sergeant, you can handle 90% of the stuff, 99% of the stuff on your own. I was like, ‘Oh yeah, I don't need help. I'll just take care of it all. It'll be good.’ As company commander, I tried to do that.
Cannot balance physical coaching and academics with being a CO. Could not, absolutely could not. My grades suffered. They got better and they picked up after I got better, I guess, delegating, literally, figuring out the right things to delegate. I guess communicate how I wanted things done because in the beginning I would delegate to do this, it'd get done completely, just nothing resembling what I'd imagined. In the future, I got better about, I guess, communicating intent literally. Communicating intent. Not being so hesitant to delegate tasks and to ask people to do things. Everybody's busy. Everybody's busy and I'd often feel bad about asking people to do things that weren’t expressed in their job. To get things done, that's one of the things I had to do. It worked out well. By the end, it was working fine. In my opinion, company commander is the best. It's the most important leadership job.

Tim found that

…there is no possible way you can do it all on your own. You need other people and with that in mind you have to go out of your way to, maybe it's not out of your way, but depending on the type of person you are. If you are naturally like a charismatic and friendly person that makes friends, then it's probably better that way than the other way, but you definitely, from the get go, you need to make friends, make relationships that are going to help you throughout whatever time it is that you're in charge of your platoon and company, and whatever it may be because had I not made good working relationships and, also, personal because I think personal relationships is what kept me sane…Not doing everything yourself, making those relationships, and then definitely communication…I think that is probably the most important lesson that I have learned…Really what it comes down to is if you expect something of somebody, first you
have to have the relationship to mean something to them and then you can expect something of them. If you do that, then generally they'll work to your satisfaction.

Donald served as both a company commander and team captain. He found the experience of juggling both positions overwhelming. “I didn't feel like I was able to…wasn't able to put as much time into organizations as I would have wanted to, to either one of them. I felt like I was cheating both of them.” While Donald appeared to actually perform quite well as commander and team captain based on his interview and may have been acting humble, the sampled cadets spoke about cadets they served with who were assigned to significant positional leadership, but were not there to lead and did not have meaningful group involvement.

John found as a platoon sergeant that his commander and first sergeant spent the majority of their time away from the company with other groups. “They weren't really around…I mean, if you're not around in the company, you can't effect change.” Dean found when he was a platoon sergeant in the summer it “was a great developmental experience…everything just worked really well, distribution of tasks that they gave the platoon sergeants and everything…but part of the reason it worked so well was because of how well personalities matched.” His experience was different when he moved to the academic year as a platoon sergeant and found cadets drawn to other groups. Dean found his “platoon leader was non-existent. During our company banquet, her superlative was most likely to not have actually been a cadet.” Grant dealt with poor performance when describing his platoon sergeant experience, “I think it was just very time intensive...Our first sergeant wasn't really competent…I and the other three platoon sergeants worked very heavily together doing a lot of cooperation to make sure that our company wasn't falling apart.”
Though all of the cadets cited examples of other cadets not leading while assigned to meaningful leadership positions, this study’s sample of cadets took advantage of the leadership opportunities presented. Wayne reflected on his leadership experiences.

West Point does a very good job of preparing you to be a platoon leader in my personal opinion…It's not necessarily West Point's job to teach you every single thing, but the guiding principles are the same. I felt that I was philosophically prepared to be a commander and I knew what it meant to be a leader of a large organization. I knew philosophically what that meant and that was the only thing I knew about being a commander. I could not explain to you what I was doing until I left the job. It was a constant effort to learn my role, to let the people who worked for me do their job well, to have your hand in everything. Everything is literally your business, in my opinion, but to also ensure that your people are doing their thing, getting their job done. Because as much as you're like ‘Oh, I want you to do it so well and in this exact way and I want that so badly’ that's, for better or for worse, that's how my personality type is, but learning the way a large organization operates is very hard, it's very hard.

Tom had a more pragmatic approach to his experience of command. He had very specific goals which aligned to the Academy’s programs and priorities. He asked the members of his team to “Take pride in your company. Take pride in your unit. Take pride in each other. Take pride in being a Soldier. Take pride in yourself.” He rallied his classmates and company mates around the concept of pride.

The biggest way that being CO I think affected me was not being able to do everything myself. Having company command of such a large unit at our age, our experience level, is kind of a unique thing for company commanders at West Point. I found out real quick
during Reorgy Week [first week back at school] that me, my first sergeant, and XO could not run the company hands on. We had to rely on the staff, platoon leaders, squad leaders. Everyone has to do their role for the company to work. I really had to identify other people's strengths so that I could know what tasks I could give them. Then also once I gave someone a task just trust them to do it. Not interfere too much. Double check…Really the delegation aspect of higher leadership is kind of what I learned most, I think, as CO.

Platoon sergeant appears as the earliest opportunity cadets have to lead peers. The majority of cadets in this sample found the platoon sergeant experience particularly meaningful, mainly because it involved complex tasks and peer leadership.

**Mentors of Cadets**

One of the research questions explored the ways cadets found support. How did that support change over time and did that support differ based on race or gender? The final significant finding of this study is that the rotating active duty military staff and faculty significantly influenced the development in the majority of the sampled cadets and race and gender appeared to have played a role.

While peers and older cadets provided support as reflected in previous findings, the rotating military staff and faculty provided the overwhelming support for most of these cadets in the study. The rotating military are those officers and NCOs assigned to West Point as junior officers and mid-grade NCOs to serve for three years and return back to the operational force.

Barbara met Major Smith as one of her instructors during second semester Plebe year. “She ended up being the first person to actually ask me how I was doing, stuff like that, to care. She kind of knows what's going on, I guess. We ended up building up a really close
relationship.” This relationship carried over into Yearling year and Barbara found that “when I had a problem, she walked me through it… she always questioned my thoughts, my thinking process...There are certain aspects that she taught me that I carry forward that really shaped my team leadership period.” Another female officer she worked with “taught me to have high expectations and standards, and stuff like that, and I had a lot of pressures on me in that way to maintain those [high expectations and standards].”

In her Yearling year while serving as a section marcher, a position where you assist the instructor administratively, Barbara grew close to one particular professor. “I'd get AI [additional instruction] all first semester, but it wasn't until like December that I was like, ‘Hey, sir, I'd like to continue this relationship into next semester, I'll come stop by and we can talk about things.’” This professor worked with her on many projects and served as her mentor in course assignments.

He is also like a big influence on my life. He was an infantry officer, but he was like the first one to even ask me what I wanted to branch and stuff like that. We just had intellectual conversations, like it was stimulating stuff about leader development…I'd read a book or he'd read a book, or an article, and we'd share them, and then we'd have a little conversation…Most of the conversations we had were about how you change your organization…what systems have you put in place, all that other stuff. Those were the kind of conversations we had, and I wouldn't get that off a cadet…cadets just aren't there. I think that kind of like forced me to mature in the leadership development realm…those were things we just talked about, and I definitely think that it made me think differently, but I just didn't get the chance to share that with other cadets, cadets just don't have those conversations.
John also found his mentor in the classroom. “I had a really good stats teacher second semester. He was just a really nice guy. I'm like an American History major. I don't like math at all, and he got me to like the subject.” John found him relatable, “He knew how to talk to people...He just seemed down-to-earth. He could make jokes during class or whatever, and just a good guy...I would come and see him for AI, even though I didn't really need AI.” John found at those AI sessions that he would have “informal conversations there. Those were nice. Those were helpful.” Later in his time at the Academy John met another instructor with much the same attributes. In John’s eyes “he was very knowledgeable about the subjects we were talking about, and he just seemed like a very down-to-earth sort of person.” John was at a point in his cadet career where he was considering what branch he would select upon graduation. This officer had branched armor. “He's part of the reason I branched armor. I don't know, he just seemed the sort of person that I would like to follow, because he just seemed very reasonable and rational, and could think things through.”

Grant found mentors in the academic departments, as well. One professor had a number of students over for the Super Bowl. This was the start of the relationship. “I've gone to him...that year and the year after...he was another person that I looked up...I wanted to branch infantry...He's a role model...I remember talking to him about what an infantry officer did...He was just a good example” This relationship branched out to other infantry officers and one in particular still serves as his mentor as this officer is a “real good person to talk to as far as having as a mentor because he'd just seen so much and had this big depth of experience that I was able to discuss with him.”

Tom was initially drawn to an instructor, but struggled to speak with him. “It was either the first day or the first day he was in ACUs [Army Combat Uniform]. Because he was Special
Forces - triple tabbed. Halo. Master diver. He'd been to every school and done everything.” Tom liked that he knew all their names the first day. Tom said he was “always upbeat. He was always like cheerful and jumping around. Super fired up about differential equations, which we were not. I looked forward to his class every day. I tried to talk to him.” Tom then spoke about having “a lot of civilian professors. It was a little bit different experience.” Where Tom did connect with the civilian assistant coach when he was a Plebe manager, he did not seem to connect with any of the civilian professors from a “meaning-making” standpoint and not one other cadet in the sample mentioned a civilian member of the staff and faculty. Later in Tom’s experience at USMA he found a good mentor in an instructor. “My instructor was an Apache pilot which I've always wanted to go aviation. He had been a CO when he was a cadet back in the day. Then I told him that that's what I wanted to do.” These “similar interests and personalities” as described by Tom sparked a relationship.

Heather did not find her role model in the classroom, but in the field. She was drawn to her CLDT lane-walker. “She's awesome; she was just the coolest mentor to ever have because she was so intense and I felt like she could do anything.” Heather further stated,

It was interesting because I hadn't really seen a female officer out in the field environment with us, rucking, going up the hills with us, and giving us knowledge about tactical advice. I hadn't seen that at West Point, probably just because, just the nature of that there's less of them in the Army. I don't think it was a function of anything other than there's not that many women in the Army, in general. Well, not that there's not that many, but that the population is smaller, and so it was really cool to see this awesome female mentor.
Heather also found a mentor while serving in Cadet Troop Leader Training over the summer at an Engineer unit at an Army post. She said her sponsor, a lieutenant, “kind of looked like me, we're the same height, both brunette…I had such a good experience with her that I could totally see myself.” For Donald, his mentor was also outside the classroom. He found his mentor in the Tactical Department.

It was absolutely unreal, because when I think about everybody or everything that I wanted to be, as an officer, as a person, as a family man, he was all of it. Without me ever knowing him, he immediately was willing to help me. He swam with me about once a week, and in addition to that, he would, same sort of deal. He would mentor me, mentally, and...a personal relationship with him while he was here, because he truly was, like, it was almost like a glimpse into the ideal future when I met him. He was definitely a major influencer….He didn't come across as the high IQ sort of smart. It was wise and reflective sort of intelligence. Obviously, he was smart, too. There was nothing that I could think of that was wrong with him. He was willing to come immediately and help me out, every week. He still had family; he still had his own cadets who had troubles. He was teaching several classes, like all these sorts of things, and you think...In the back of my head, I guess I've always had this idea of like a Renaissance Man, somebody's who's almost like a master of all trades. I'm not quite there, but very skilled in multiple things. He was definitely that, and he was humble about it, and he was more than happy to help anyone else approach whatever goals that they had as well. He helped me out with that as long as I knew him. To this day, I think he might have been the best and most outstanding officer that I've met in my life.
Donald also experienced working with a professional officer during a summer leader detail at USMA. He said “she was also one of the most outstanding officers I ever met… absolutely amazing woman. Taught me a lot about work ethic and efficiency… I think a lot more of it was about just the interpersonal skills and really good interpersonal skills.” As he observed this officer he noticed that “people are drawn to extroverted people. She's definitely extroverted. Very easy to talk to. Very easy to get along with. Also, just really good at her job. No, she was absolutely amazing at her job, but she never made it stressful for us or anyone.”

Answering the question on the influence of gender and race, Barbara and Heather, the only women in the sample, were drawn to women mentors. Donald was also drawn to a woman for mentorship, but as the only African-American cadet in the sample, Donald’s two mentors were also African-American. Peter, the only Hispanic cadet in the sample population, had no adult mentor. Every Caucasian male cadet found only Caucasian male mentors.

Like Donald, Joe was drawn to a Tactical Officer. Joe was going through a rough time at the Academy and found “this guy, he has this experience as a leader that he can actually help me… At this point, I don't really have any other options.” Joe found that despite his perceived barriers with adults, he connected with his tactical officer.

I kind of just opened up to him. Not completely. That's something I really struggled with. I struggled with barriers my first couple years at the Academy. I think a lot of people do… I had a really rigid barrier with TACs at first. I started kind of letting it be open, letting it permeate a little bit, but as I realize I started telling him these things…He has this empathy that I didn't think I was going to be able to see from a Major, from a Captain, or from a Lieutenant Colonel, or an E7 originally…He was ridiculously observant. Didn't say a whole lot. What he said almost made too much sense…I liked him
from the get-go. That interaction took off from Yearling year on. It's lasted even though he's not my TAC any longer. It's lasted….When I have issues, honestly I'll call. I'll email him…It's just really been really good to have somebody that has been there and that I've been able to lean on, for lack of better phrasing, and get that opinion, get that vibe. He's got experience. He's personal. He'll shoot it to me straight. He's candid. I'm candid also with him in a very respectful manner…I'll go head strong into a conversation and be like, ‘Whatever he says I'll take it into consideration, but I'm not going to let him 100% sway me’. Then when I leave I'm like, ‘Dang it. He got me again.’….Being able to have these conversations and get opinions is super important as a cadet…I just think you get a lot more value from having open dialog with mentors…I think I did learn the most from my mentors.

Grant and Tim also found great mentorship from their Tactical Officers. Grant stated, “My TAC team was really big, too, both of them…they were very present…they were both good people that we could look up to.” Tim found he had “a great relationship with my TAC officer and he has taught me so many valuable lessons and pieces of information.” Tim, in a way, regretted his relationship with his Tactical Officer because he wished

…the rest of my classmates in company had this relationship with my TAC officer. It's not realistic. I got that relationship because I went to the meetings with him every single day for a whole semester, because I was the company commander, but I would just talk to him and learn different things about the Army and what works. What doesn't work?

Leadership philosophies, leadership styles, and that was definitely beneficial to me…go to his office and we'd just talk.
Tim also enjoyed a great relationship with his Tactical Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO). He found that he can “definitely have that relationship with my TAC officer, but my TAC NCO is even more easy, I guess, to have that relationship with.” Tim interacted with his NCO routinely and informally and described him as “just like that type of person, really involved…He's had every Firstie over to his house to have dinner with his family. He really cares about us as far as our development beyond West Point.”

Tim was not alone finding mentorship from his Tactical NCO. Rich discovered as a cadre member at Cadet Field Training that he had a great TAC NCO to serve as a mentor. “For the two-week LTP [leader training program] we were attached at the hip. He's really one of the most intense and devoted NCOs I've had the pleasure of working with. It was definitely a great relationship.” Rich had seen him in “passing” before CFT, but never worked with him.

He was incredibly supportive of the vision I had for how I wanted to run things, and he was all about letting me try something. ‘If it works, awesome, let's keep doing that. If it doesn't, you could try this, worked for me in the past. It's up to you, though’…. I mean, that was a relationship that I really treasure. We wouldn't see eye-to-eye on everything a hundred percent of the time, but it was never to the point where it was combative or unprofessional. It was definitely a mentoring sort of role that I think I wouldn't have that positive of an experience if it weren't for him.

Dean and Tom also found mentorship from their Tactical NCOs. Dean’s TAC NCO is “a great person, great individual. Makes his priorities very clear when it comes to taking care of people, getting the job done, balancing those two. Just considering cases individually and remembering that people are people.” Tom found excitement in his TAC NCO. “You could tell he really cared about us. His big thing was pride.” Tom said he learned a lot from his TAC NCO.
“I've kind of been a little reserved, because that was the safe thing to do…be the middle of the pack. I started being a little more assertive from watching him.”

Reflecting on his relationship with his officers-in-charge of his sports team, Wayne believed that his officers had a better sense of how to enact leadership. He described it as “how to work with and through people…call people when you need something…leadership is not sending an email…it's maybe going and knocking on the door.” Wayne felt over time that he developed a relationship with his officers-in-charge. “I can say ‘You know what? We tried what you said, respectfully, and this is the way that they saw it and I think the team would be better off doing it this way.’” Wayne knew it took time to develop such a relationship and to “have that very respectful relationship in both directions is hard as hell, it's hard as hell, and that depends on the people you're leading, it depends on the people you're being led by.”

Joe, who had mentor relationships with professors, tactical officers, and coaches, wrapped it up nicely for all those who were interviewed.

I've had instructors throughout my time at the Academy that have been amazing. Those interactions didn't really take flight until after I got out of the course…another reason why I encourage people to make those interactions with their instructors. Not for preferential treatment, or for pity, or anything like that. Just for mentorship and for growth, because it helps. There's lessons learned. There's lessons learned with good instructors and bad instructors. I had just so many good ones. I've had not so good ones. You learn something from both. That's something I also try to tell the people that I'm interacting with, whether or not it's as company commander or now as a Trunk Room Officer. I think it's difficult. I think the bottom two classes have a really hard time
understanding that you can have a personal professional relationship. I believe they are somehow led to believe that it's either strictly personal or strictly professional.

Conclusion

The cadet narratives describe the essence of the cadet experience. The experiences closely follow the stages of development of a leadership identity captured by Komives et al. (2005). Cadets moved from the exploration and engagement stage to the leader identified stage of leadership identity development. Though a few of the cadets displayed glimpses of emerging in the leadership differentiated stage, those glimpses were rare and it appears the USMA environment may reinforce a leader-centric view of leadership (Stage Three).

Select experiences, such as serving as platoon sergeant, company executive officer, and company commander proved especially meaningful developmentally as the duties were challenging and the peer leadership associated with the position added to the complexity. In these positions cadets developed into more trusting and confident leaders. Finally, though many adults played a significant role as meaning makers for the cadets, those adults were primarily active duty rotating staff and faculty and race and gender appeared to have mattered in the establishment of the relationship. The next chapter includes discussions of these findings along with implications for USMA and includes recommendations for future research based on the findings.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The United States Military Academy’s mission is to develop leaders for the Army. The West Point Leader Development System focuses on eight outcomes that encompass what a graduating leader must be, know, and do. Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) found that a person “with a strong leader identity will be motivated to act in accordance with this identity” (p. 184). Recent assessments show a select number of USMA graduates fell short in their leader actions or inactions in the days, months, and even years following graduation (USMA, 2014b; USMA, 2015b; USMA, 2016c). Lewis et al. (2005) found that over one-third of the senior year cadets were still operating at a Kegan Stage 2 (self-interest) or transitioning to Stage 3 (shared meaning). These stages closely line up with Komives et al. (2005) Stage Three where one views themselves as a leader only when serving in a formal leadership role (Owen, 2012). There are significant periods of time post-graduation where cadets will find themselves not serving in positional leadership, yet still be expected to act like leaders. As important, the first assignment as a platoon leader may provide the newly-minted officer with position authority, but for the first time he or she will be the least experienced member of their platoon. In these cases a shared approach to leadership, an approach in the repertoire of a Stage Four leader (Komives et al., 2005), might serve him or her well (Lindsay, Day, & Halpin, 2011).

USMA leaders are exploring ways to enhance the leader development program. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey to become leaders of character. By using cadet company commanders as the sample population
this study explored how the cadets viewed their developmental experience and how the environment shaped their leadership identity development.

Twelve cadet company commanders participated in the study. The population consisted of 10 men and 2 women. Of the 10 men, 8 were Caucasian, 1 was Hispanic, and 1 was African-American. Both women in the study were Caucasian. The cadets ranged in age from 21-28 years old and represented membership from all four regiments in the Corps of Cadets. The primary data source was interviews with the cadet commanders. The interview design was semi-structured in order to remain focused on the research purpose, but allow freedom to explore deeper the experiences of the cadets. This design allowed the cadets to tell their stories based on the research questions.

The research questions were: How do cadets who just finished commanding a cadet company describe the experience? What challenges did the cadets encounter over the course of the experience? In what ways did the cadets find support? How did that support change over time? Did this support differ based on race or gender? What prior experiences did cadets believe best prepared them to serve in the role of company commander? In what ways were the cadets challenged and supported as cadet commanders? Now that these cadets are out of command and not in a formal leadership position how do they view their role in the company? How do others view their role?

The interview transcripts served as the key data source. The data was analyzed as it was gathered. Each transcript was coded line by line using categories of the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2005). A cross-case analysis became possible as more transcripts were made available. This coding allowed comments to be grouped into categories
that were responsive to the researcher’s purpose. As these categories were refined the analysis of the study led to significant findings.

An analysis of the data produced four findings. First, the essence of the cadet experience included group influences, developmental influences, developing self, changing view of self with others, and a broadening view of leadership. Second, the USMA experience appeared to reinforce a leader-centric view for this sample of cadets. Third, serving in select leadership positions over peers was when these cadets realized they could not do it all and they started to develop themselves as more trusting and confident leaders. Finally, the rotating active duty military staff and faculty significantly influenced the development of the majority of sampled cadets and race and gender appeared to have played a role. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings, explore the implications for practice, and present limitations of the study and potential for future research.

Discussion

The Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2005) provides a design for leader development that compliments the essence of the West Point experience. The model identifies “a number of meaningful factors that work together to facilitate the development of a leadership identity” (p. 610). This discussion will look at the overall process of developing a leadership identity at USMA and then focus in on three areas of significant importance to those responsible for the implementation of the West Point Leader Development System.

Essence of the Experience

The research questions revolved around the essence of the cadet experience. The cadets focused on their interactions within various groups and how they were challenged and supported in those experiences. In each case the interview focused on their experiences in a cadet company,
though other group experiences were discussed in the interviews. In all cases there was a consistent finding that the essence of the cadet experience closely aligns with the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2005). Komives et al. (2006) found there were five categories that influenced leadership identity: group influences, developmental influences, developing self, changing view of self, and changing view of leadership (p. 403). The authors found that “movement through the stages was informed by their experiences in each of the categories” (p. 404).

Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt (2003) found that high school students participating in extracurricular and community service activities demonstrated increased “interpersonal competence, self-concept,…grade point average, school engagement, and educational aspirations” (p. 867). They also found these activities provided “a forum in which to express and refine one’s identity” (p. 876). The cadets’ experiences just prior to arriving at USMA proved illustrative in understanding their leadership identity development. The cadets described activities and views which corresponded with the later phases of the Exploration and Engagement Stage of the model. This stage included “interacting with peers by seeking opportunities to explore their numerous interests. They sought new friendships in group settings such as scouts, choir, sports, band, dance lessons, and religious youth groups” (Komives et al., 2006, p. 406). The future cadets also showed glimpses of the early phases of the Leader Identified Stage of the model (Stage Three). This stage includes perspectives that “groups were comprised of leaders and followers and believed the leader did leadership – that leaders were responsible for group outcomes” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 606).

The leadership development experience of the sampled cadets showed that in their later high school and early cadet experiences that they explored various group involvement
opportunities that fit their interests. Group influences at this stage of development “focused on interpersonal peer relationships” (Komives et al., 2006, p. 407). Groups provided a comfortable place and “fit their developing self-image” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 602).

The cadets looked to adults and older peers as leaders and received affirmation of their potential from these role models. These cadets held leader-centric views and believed they were dependent on the leader when in the role of follower and independent when in the role of leader. They each held a hierarchical view of leadership in their organizations (Komives et al., 2005).

Komives et al. (2005) envisioned that movement through stages was not linear and could be “a helix where one returns to a category such as developing self with a higher level of complexity” (p. 608). Many of the cadets initially found themselves either transitioning out of Stage Two of the LID or in the emerging part of Stage Three. This is a time where the cadets recognized they have leadership potential as bestowed on them by adults and older peers. The cadets identified new skills needed for this transition and “looked to older peers or more experienced group members as models for how to get things done” (Komives et al., 2006, p. 407). The cadets took on more leadership roles and the Leadership Identity Model shows that “taking on leadership roles contributes to leadership identity salience, which may lead to accepting even more leadership roles” (Owen, 2012, p. 27).

Komives et al., (2009) found this transition from Stage Three to Stage Four the most complex of the model. A Stage Four leadership identity had an “awareness that people in organizations were highly interdependent and that leadership was happening all around” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 606). Later in their USMA careers cadets began to narrow their participation in groups and take on more challenging leadership roles in the company such as platoon sergeant and executive officer prior to commander. It was in these roles that they
realized they could not do it all themselves and needed to rely on others in the group for organizational success. They started to apply their coursework, particularly from their leadership classes, in how they were leading in their groups. Adults and older peers changed from role models to mentors and meaning makers. Many cadets in the sample showed glimpses of realizing that non-positional leaders could contribute leadership within the group, but these views were rare and the majority of cadets maintained a leader-centric view of the organization.

**Reaching Interdependence**

Komives et al. (2005) found that college students changed their view of self with others when they interacted with group influences (p. 604). These cadets would move from being followers in a group to the point where they wanted to be a positional leader. In each case the cadets possessed a leader-centric view of organizations. The goal in the development of a leadership identity is to eventually move away from “believing only positional leaders did leadership” to being interdependent where one “believed that leadership came from anywhere in the group” (p. 605). The finding from this study is that the cadet environment may actually delay movement from independence to interdependence.

The study was focused on seeing if cadets, recently out of command and not in a formal leadership position, would still view their role in the company as a leader and continue to exercise leadership on behalf of the group. The finding was that in the majority of cases the sampled cadets did not view themselves as leaders when not in a leader position and the USMA experience appears to delay cadets from fully reaching interdependence as cadets continued to view leadership as positional.

The sampled cadets used terms like “not my place,” “step back,” and “I don’t have any sort of command authority to make stuff change or happen.” These phrases, coming from cadets
who had previously served in leadership positions where it was clear that the organization relies on all members for success, should be concerning to USMA.

**Trusting and Confident Leaders**

One of the research questions inquired into what prior experiences cadets believed best prepared them to serve in the role of company commander. The study found that a majority of cadets believed it was while serving in leadership positions over peers with meaningful group involvement when they first realized they started to develop themselves as more trusting and confident leaders. Immersion in Komives et al. (2005) Stage Three allowed cadets “to take on more complex leadership challenges that promoted the recognition that they could not do everything themselves and that the talents and skills of group members were vital for organizational success” (Komives et al., 2006, p. 409).

The cadets related that it was positions such as platoon sergeant and executive officer where leadership started to become more challenging and complex. In the views of the sampled cadets, serving as a squad leader or a staff officer did not push them to develop as leaders. The requirement to lead peers, delegate tasks, and communicate intent proved significant in developing trust and confidence. The cadets also found that it was not just placement in the leadership position that made it meaningful, but the time and energy applied to that leadership role were important factors. Some cadets, both in the sample and referenced by the sample, appeared to be pulled to other groups while serving as positional leaders in the company. Astin (1984) found that though his “theory of involvement generally holds that ‘more is better,’ there are probably limits beyond which increasing involvement ceases to produce desirable results and can even become counter-productive” (p. 528).
Mentors of Cadets

One of the research questions explored the ways cadets found support and if that support changed over time. The study also considered if race or gender played a role in the support provided. The final significant finding of this study is that in the majority of cases rotating military staff and faculty played a significant role influencing the development of cadets’ leadership identity and race and gender appeared to have played a role.

Peers, older cadets, and even family members provided support to the cadets as they transited the developmental journey at USMA, however, the rotating military staff and faculty appeared to provide the majority of leadership development support for most of the cadets in the study. The rotating military staff and faculty moved from role models and mentors to meaning-makers (Komives et al., 2009). These mentors and meaning-makers were found in the classrooms, the tactical department, and in the training areas around USMA. They engaged with the cadets first as role models, but the relationships transitioned to meaning makers and in some cases became collegial. In all cases gender and race may have drawn the initial attraction as in most cases mentors and protégés appear to prefer same race relationships (Hu, et al., 2008).

Kegan (1982) stated that “Who comes into a person’s life may be the single greatest factor of influence to what that life becomes” (p. 19). Baxter Magolda (2014) found that self-authorship emerges when learning partnerships encourage one’s internal voice to come forward (pp. 30-31). Owen (2012) found that having “access to someone who can facilitate meaning-making from experiences is essential to the development of a relational leadership identity (p. 29). The majority of cadets greatly benefited from influential mentors.
Implications for Practice

This study yielded a number of implications for the practice of developing a leadership identity in cadets at USMA. Other implications emerged from the review of the literature.

1. USMA leaders might benefit from adopting Komives et al. (2005) Leadership Identity Model to compliment the outcomes based program in existence today with the goal of moving cadets from Stage Three (Leader Identified) to Stage Four (Leader Differentiated). The current USMA model does not clearly distinguish the appropriate developmental environment for cadets in various stages of development. The LID Model appears to provide a more understandable pattern of development than what is in use today at USMA. Adoption of a model like the LID would add consistency to the leader development system. Komives et al. (2009) found that research shows that “hierarchical thinking precedes systemic perspectives” (p. 33). The LID Model allows for a transition from hierarchical thinking to a systems perspective with cadets starting at a simple leadership level before moving on in complexity. Given most college-aged students start their experience at the Stage Three of the LID Model, this model fits well with the timeline of cadet leader development.

2. USMA should consider increasing the number of positions that allow for cadets to lead peers in challenging assignments later in the cadet experience. An insufficient number of such positions exist today (USMA, 2016a). The efforts by the Brigade Tactical Department to track “key developmental” positions for all cadets in their final two years may prove promising.

3. The USMA leadership should consider the costs and benefits of the leader-centric underpinning of the three-week Cadet Leader Development Training (CLDT) and strive
to mitigate the negative lessons as this training appears to reinforce a Stage Three leadership identity. Rotating cadets through leader roles is a sound process in developing a leadership identity, but cadets at CLDT “need to learn functional group skills to help them approach groups as interdependent participants” (Komives et al., 2009, p. 38).

4. For the first time in over 40 years the Academy is going to “scramble” the first class. This means that all rising seniors will move to new companies. Companies are not chosen by the cadets, but many cadets come to rely on the company as their core group. Each cadet commander in this study had a strong attachment to their cadet company prior to command. Commitment to one organization is a cornerstone of the LID Model. This study suggests that USMA should review the “scramble” to assess the impact on involvement in the company by the senior class. This study and the literature show that cadets may choose to more strongly identify with other groups (teams, clubs, and peers) than with the new company. Komives et al. (2009) found that USMA educators should encourage cadets “to stay in a group to reach differentiation, the crisis of Stage Three, so crucial to the struggle for integration that is the key indicator of growth” (p. 38).

5. The study suggests USMA should consider establishing an environment in a cadet’s final year at USMA where shared leadership is expected. If handled properly, the scramble may provide an opportunity for such an environment to emerge. This effort should be reinforced with leadership education in the junior-year leadership coursework, company-level leader education and development programs, and a review of grading and the implications of the order of merit system.

6. The study suggests that USMA should maintain a rotating military staff and faculty that reflect the gender and race of the cadet population. Findings from this study indicate that
cadets are initially drawn to mentors that look like them. This cohort of staff and faculty would likely benefit from education in the LID Model and methods to assess at what stage a cadet may be operating at so the staff and faculty can tailor their engagement to meet the cadet’s developmental need. A positive attribute of all members of the staff and faculty reflected in the findings appears to be approachability, and this characteristic should remain part of the selection process for rotating military members.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should prove informative to those professionals involved with developing leaders in college; however, there are some limitations. This study was based on one small subset of cadets and at one point in time. The study relied on the cadets’ accurate recollection of their high school experiences and early years at USMA. A need exists for a longitudinal study of the Leadership Identity Development Model nested with the USMA experience. The longitudinal study would allow for a better understanding of the developmental process as it occurs in the environment.

Even among company commanders this study did not reflect all cadet populations. There were no Asian-American cadets and only one African-American and Hispanic cadet in the sample. In addition, only two women participated in the study. Future studies are needed to assess the developmental process for these growing USMA cadet populations.

USMA would derive great insight by studying those cadets who do not have the opportunity outside of Cadet Leader Development Training (CLDT) to serve in complex positions where they lead their peers. USMA may find members of this cohort are among the group of cadets who stagnate in Stage 2 or transitioning to Stage 3 of Kegan’s model (Lewis, et
al., 2005). It would be interesting to find out if that population correlates with the negative reports that USMA receives from the Army post-graduation.

This study did not look specifically at leadership identity development opportunities in other groups outside the cadet company except where that participation was incidental to the role of commander in the company. The experiences of the sampled cadets who had leadership experiences in groups outside the company proved significant. A study on the impact of group experiences outside the cadet company, such as sport teams and clubs, would likely benefit USMA.

Conclusions

Developing leaders of character is the primary mission of the United States Military Academy. Identity development is not only a key component of leadership, but also a desired aspect of the college experience. USMA is among the very best institutions in the world at developing leaders, but from recent reports and self-assessments it has room for improvement. Understanding how cadets develop a leadership identity and, therefore, remain motivated to act in accordance with that identity would go a long way in delivering the very best leaders for America’s Army. This study provided insights into the development of leaders at USMA and furthered the existing scholarship in developing a leadership identity.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

1. Thank them for being part of this research effort and explain my role as lead researcher.
2. Discuss the process and work to get them interested in the study.
3. Provide the informed consent form and explain to them that they can drop from the study at any time, they can choose to not answer any and all of the questions, and that whether they choose to participate or not there will be no repercussions or benefits other than they will learn a little more about themselves and possibly contribute to the leader development system at West Point.
4. Inform them that the session will be recorded and they will have an opportunity to read through the transcript and make adjustments.
5. Let them know that the recording is starting and the purpose of the interview is to help me understand the essence of their experiences.
6. Confirm on record that the interview is being recorded with an introduction that starts the recording by identifying the cadet with a pseudonym and clearly stating that the consent form is signed, the cadet is aware that participation is completely voluntary, and that they know they can discontinue participation at any time or decline to answer any question without repercussion. Ensure to receive an affirmative response from the cadet on the record.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your high school activities such as clubs and teams you were a part of?
   a. What leadership roles did you have?
   b. Describe some of the leaders you interacted with?
   c. What made you decide on West Point? Who/what were your influencers?
   d. As you reflect on those high school years, in what ways do you think they shaped who you are today?
2. Now let’s visit Plebe year.
   a. Describe some of the challenges you faced?
   b. Who were some of the people you most admired? Leaned on?
c. In what ways did those experiences influence your view of leadership?

3. Now let’s look at your yearling year.
   a. What were some of the challenges starting with summer training?
   b. Who was influential in your life at that time?
   c. In what ways did those experiences influence your view of leadership?

4. When did you start to see yourself as a leader?

5. Now let’s turn to Cow year.
   a. What were some of the challenges starting with summer training?
   b. Who was influential in your life at that time?
   c. How did PL300 (Leadership Course) help you in your leadership roles?
   d. In what ways did those experiences influence your view of leadership?

6. Okay, let’s look at Firstie year
   a. What were some of the challenges starting with summer training?
   b. Who was influential in your life at that time?
   c. In what ways did those experiences influence your view of leadership?
   d. In command, what resonated with you and your views of leadership?
   e. Who do you talk to about your experiences?
   f. After serving as a company commander and now several weeks removed has your view on leadership changed?

7. How do you describe yourself as a leader?

8. What have you learned from working with cadets who are different from you?

9. Overall, how have you changed over your cadet career? Has your views of leadership evolved? What advice would you give to younger cadets who are following behind you?
Appendix B: STUDY INVITATION

January 2017

Dear (Former Cadet Company Commander),

I am inviting you to participate in a doctoral study exploring the West Point Leader Development System through the eyes of senior cadets who rose to the rank of company commander. You have significant experiences that will help the institution better understand how leader development occurs in the corps.

The purpose of this study is to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and consists of an audio-recorded individual interview that will last about 90 minutes. The study will run from January – May 2017 with results/findings published after you graduate. You will be provided a copy of your interview transcript to review as the study proceeds and if you desire a copy of the completed study prior to publishing. I do not foresee this study presenting any risks or hardships on you other than the time you invest. Your time invested will contribute to improving the leader development system of USMA.

Your confidentiality is of extreme importance to me and every measure will be used to maintain your trust with the information provided. I plan to use pseudonyms and composite narratives in the final report and your interview transcript will remain under lock and key. Your confidentiality will be protected in compliance with the University of New England’s (parent university) research with human participants’ policies and procedures as well as the procedures of USMA’s Human Protections Administrator.

There is no compensation for your participation other than learning something about yourself and your development through this opportunity to reflect on your experiences. If you have any questions please contact me via e-mail at robert.carl@usma.edu or telephone at (845)938-2113. Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please e-mail me at robert.carl@usma.edu or call x2113 within the next week to let me know you are interested in participating in the study. Your contribution to this study will impact cadet development in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Robert K. Carl, Lead Researcher
Appendix C: CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Developing Leaders: The Use of Challenge and Support to Develop West Point Cadets

Principal Investigator: Robert K. Carl, Special Assistant to the Commandant, USCC, United States Military Academy under the auspices of the University of New England for a doctoral thesis in support of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. Investigator’s e-mail is robert.carl@usma.edu and telephone number is (845)938-2113. The faculty advisor on the project is Dr. Marylin Newell at UNE. Dr. Newell’s e-mail is mnewell@collegematters.us.

Introduction:
- Please read this form. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?
- The purpose of this study is to explore with a select sample of first class cadets the essence of their shared experiences as USMA cadets, with a particular focus on the challenges presented and the support provided while moving through this developmental journey.
- There is no consultative or financial interest relating to the study.

Who will be in this study?
- This study is focused on senior year cadets who served as cadet company commanders in the fall semester.
- The study invitation went out to all 36 cadets who commanded in the fall of 2016.

What will I be asked to do?
- Research activities consist of an audio-recorded interview that will last no more than 90 minutes. You will also be asked to check the content of the transcript from the interview.
- The expected duration of the individual’s participation in the project is from February-March 2017.
• The sample population was not random. You were selected due to your cadet experiences, primarily your service as a cadet company commander.
• The principal investigator will be the only individual conducting the interviews.
• There will be no reimbursement or compensation for participation in this project.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**
• There are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts that may result from participation.
• You are able to stop your participation in the study at any time.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**
• There are no direct benefits to you from the research except having an opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a cadet.
• There may be a benefit to the Academy and those cadets who follow you.

**What will it cost me?**
• There is no financial cost incurred from participating in the study, only time.

**How will my privacy be protected?**
• Pseudonyms will be used in the study and, where appropriate, composite narratives will be used.
• The interviews will take place in a private office.
• You will have the opportunity to review your interview before use in the study and to review the study prior to release. The study will not be released at the Academy or UNE until after you have graduated. All transcripts from interviews will be locked in the investigator’s office. All audio recordings will be destroyed upon the study’s release.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**
• This study is designed to protect your identity so no one other than the principal investigator can link the data to you.
• Research records will be kept in a locked file in the locked office of the principal investigator.
• Data will be stored on a password protected computer drive.
• Individually identifiable data will be destroyed after the study is complete.
• Data will be coded
• Data will be encrypted using industry standards.
• Please note that study sponsors, regulatory agencies, and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.
• A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will
be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

- The audio recordings of the interviews will only be accessed by the principal investigator and the transcriber and they will be erased upon your review of the transcription. The transcript will be run through a data analysis program.
- The data, stripped of any identifiable markings, may be used for future research purposes.
- The study will be provided to participants prior to their graduation and prior to submission to both UNE and USMA.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with USMA. Your decision to participate will not impact your standing as a cadet.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The principal investigator is Mr. Robert Carl. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact him at robert.carl@usma.edu or (845)938-2113.
- The faculty advisor is Dr. Marylin Newell at University of New England. For questions or more information concerning this research and you want to contact her directly the best e-mail is mnewell@collegematters.us.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

**Participant’s Statement**
I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant’s signature or Legally authorized representative

Date

Printed name

**Researcher’s Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher’s signature

Date

Printed name