Chapter 10

Soft Skills and Leader Development at a Senior Military College:
Developing Tomorrow's Leaders for the Good of American Society

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ABSTRACT

Hiring managers in organizations seek college graduates who possess certain "soft skills" that enable them to be of value immediately upon entering the workforce. In response, many institutions of higher education are using and expanding high impact educational practices to not only improve knowledge acquisition and retention, but also to develop the soft skills that help make students "employable" after college. In U.S. senior military college corps of cadets, soft skills development is nothing new: it has always been part and parcel of their intensive and highly effective leader development programs. Although these programs exist primarily to produce leaders for the military—a public good—graduates contribute to the public good in other sectors of American society as well. This chapter depicts how cadets are transformed into highly effective leaders for the military, and how they contribute in other ways to the good of American society.

INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that hiring managers in organizations seek college graduates who possess certain "soft skills" which enable them to be of value immediately upon entering the workforce. To make teaching and learning more effective, to successfully compete for students and influencers (e.g., professional school counselors, parents, hiring managers), and to respond to the accountability movement in higher education, many institutions are using and expanding high impact educational practices, such as "collaborative

assignments and projects" (Kuh, 2008, p. 10).[1] Such practices not only improve knowledge acquisition and retention, but they also develop soft skills that help make students "employable" after college. In United States (U.S.) senior military college cadet programs, leadership and soft skills development is nothing new—and absolutely crucial.

This chapter focuses on leader and soft skill development in the Corps of Cadets at the University of North Georgia (UNG), which is designated as a senior military college in Title X of the U.S. Code. (Armed Forces Act of 1956, § 2111a). The other Title X senior military institutions are Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Norwich University, Texas A&M University, The Citadel, and Virginia Military Institute. Each has Air Force, Army, and Navy (which includes Marine Corps) cadet programs, while UNG stands alone as an Army-only program.[2]

This chapter details what relatively few in academe and American society understand: how college students are transformed into highly effective leaders for the military—the highest ranked institution of the 14 surveyed by Gallup's annual "Confidence in Institutions" poll (McCarthy, 2019). My argument is that skills and leadership taught in military college cadet programs are not only apropos to military leadership, but also very transferrable: People who possess such skills provide an invaluable and necessary public good for American society. The forthcoming discussion will describe Army cadet leader development at UNG as a case study in educational training in soft skills and leader development pertinent to postgraduate career and civic participation.

SOFT SKILLS AND LEADER DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARMY CONTEXT

What comprises soft skills, and even the use of the term "soft skills," varies by publication, disciplinary perspective, organizational context, and/or the development stage of a given labor market. For example, a Google (2020) search revealed many organizations using the "soft skills" terminology. But Taylor and Haras (2020) used the term "career-relevant skills" in lieu of "soft skills" in their article for the American Council on Education on the subject of better aligning higher education coursework with "career relevancy" and instilling in students the "knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be successful and engaged workers and learners" (p. 1). The authors noted other differences in naming conventions from three other organizations for essentially similar "soft skill" learning outcomes.

Naming conventions notwithstanding, one entity relevant to the U.S. context that examines the nexus between employer needs and related developmental education provided by colleges and universities is the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), which refers to "soft skills" as "competencies." One objective of the NACE is to determine what competencies employers, hiring managers, and career services professionals believe it takes for college students to be "ready" for the workplace following graduation (see Table 1). The NACE Center for Career Development and Talent Acquisition defined career readiness as "the attainment of competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace" (NACE, "Career Readiness Defined," 2020).

Similar to the NACE, the U.S. Army is an organization that out of necessity researches leadership, and creates the doctrine upon which Army leaders at all levels are developed. The Army categorizes what many other organizations term "soft skills" as leader "attributes" and "competencies." (U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication [ADP] 6-22, 2019). Table 1 shows the similarity between the complete list of eight current (2020) NACE competencies, and the portion of Army leader competencies and attributes that correspond to NACE. In the Army's leader development model, leader-

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