



# Moving Forward in a New Direction

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I was recently talking to a grad who asked what my priorities would now be, given that the fundraising issue for the Academy appeared to have been resolved. I reminded him of the "friendraising" responsibilities of the AOG and shared with him my views on the tremendous challenges that being successful in this arena will entail.

Creating a "world class" friendraising operation for the Air Force Academy will require both significant infrastructure-building by the AOG and a fundamental shift in attitude among the principle players: the Academy, the graduate community and the U.S. Air Force. The cold hard truth is that if we are to compete on a level comparable to our sister service academies, particularly West Point and Annapolis, we will need to admit to some stark realities and substantially change the way we do business.

While some might disagree, I have soberingly concluded that when compared to graduates from West Point and Annapolis, USAF Academy graduates lag considerably behind in the level of cohesiveness among each other and in the level of support for our alma mater. Additionally, there has been scant institutional recognition of this problem and no systematic efforts to address it.

Our second president, John Adams, when defending the British soldiers in the Boston Massacre Trial in 1770, made a statement that is often repeated; "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." Unfortunately, the evidence for my conclusion, which comes from my visits to both West Point and Annapolis, time spent with my counterparts, and extensive conversations with graduates from all three academies, is exceedingly clear. Let me share both some indisputable facts and anecdotal evidence to support my premise.

We can begin by looking at membership in the alumni associations. At West Point, participation in the AOG is 100 percent. In the interest of full disclosure and total transparency, I will note that membership in the West Point AOG is automatic at graduation. The cost for AOG operations has been subsidized by a grad-funded endowment that provides over a million dollars a year, but that, in itself, is incredible evidence of both cohesiveness and support. The more appropriate point of comparison is with Annapolis, where, as at USAFA, participation is voluntary. At Navy, the membership level is consistently above 85 percent and in recent years has approached 90 percent. At USAFA, the graduate participation level is 57 percent. The other fact of note regarding membership in the alumni associations focuses on the number of graduate chapters. West Point has over 120 Societies, their name for chapters. Annapolis has over 100 Chapters and 76 class clubs. USAFA has 31 Chapters.

Some USAFA graduates have argued that our AOG doesn't do a good job of providing services to graduates and that we need to do more. This, in their view, accounts for the differences in graduate participation and support. I will be the first to admit that we can always do a better job and, as a former businessman, I clearly understand the concept of "the value proposition" in attracting resources. Yet an analysis of services provided by the three alumni associations to their graduates and institutions shows a contrary fact. In looking at 73 areas of combined services, West Point provided 38, Annapolis provided 41 and our AOG provided 71. Should we and can we do more? Absolutely! Is a lack of services a justifiable reason for poor AFA grad participation in the AOG? The facts suggest other causes and "facts are stubborn things."

Apart from the hard numbers, however, is the fundamental difference in attitudes about the expectations of the alumni association. As stated before, it is not uncommon for some AFA graduates to voice their desires for greater support from our AOG. This stance is in sharp contrast to Navy's clear communications and the understanding of its graduates that the Naval Academy Alumni Association is the vehicle by which graduates can support the Academy and provide benefits to its midshipmen. Additionally, my counterpart at West Point, Bob McClure, '76, told me that they are very clear in communicating their expectations of support from cadets and parents from day one at Army. Given that one of our core values is "service before self," one could certainly argue that some of our graduates, by constantly asking for more, don't truly get the concept of 'giving back' and aren't willing to "walk the talk" of our stated values.

This is a good segue into the area of financial support. When I was doing my research to prepare to interview for this job, I discovered that the Naval Academy Alumni Association and Foundation had assets approaching \$250 million and that the West Point AOG had assets of well over \$200 million at the time. This compared to assets of just under \$50 million for the USAFA AOG. I instinctively rationalized the tremendous disparities as due to the longevity of our respective institutions. However, I subsequently learned that Annapolis had only begun to seriously focus on fundraising in 1999 and had raised the majority of their assets between then and 2005. I also discovered that West Point had conducted a very successful major campaign around the same time period. More intriguingly, when an

analysis was conducted of the major donors to the campaign, only a handful of West Pointers had graduated prior to 1959, the year of our first graduating class. Conclusion: while age of the institution may have been a small factor in the disproportion, there were clearly other major factors at play.

When I visited the Naval Academy this past year, I had the opportunity to spend considerable time with my counterpart, Byron Marchant, '78. Let me say that my reception at Navy was more than gracious and the time spent and information obtained was invaluable. As we toured the alumni house, I noticed a large plaque with the names of the past Presidents/Chairs of the Board of the Alumni Association. With very few exceptions, since the late 1800s, the President/Chairman has been a flag officer. When I made note of that fact to Byron, he merely said that this was a duty of graduates, particularly those who had benefited the most from their academy experience. It was simply an "expectation." Now, let me be clear. I don't believe that one needs to be a flag officer to provide great leadership. Our current Chair of the Board is an excellent example. The important point is the belief that from those who have obtained the highest ranks in the Navy, there is an obligation to give back, by coming back to serve the institution through active involvement in the alumni association. I think it is fair to say that this expectation is not in the culture of the typical general officer who is an Air Force Academy graduate nor, frankly, of the graduate community as a whole.

I could go on with legions of examples of how our culture differs from our two older siblings. I could also offer examples that I have personally observed on how the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy support their academies and alumni associations in a far greater and more aggressive way than our Air Force does. Are West Point cadets and graduates or Annapolis midshipman and graduates inherently better than we are? Obviously not. We all come from the same pool of outstanding applicants. What is it then about their attitudes and processes that produce superior levels of cohesiveness and loyalty in their grads? The fundamental question becomes, "What does the Air Force, the Academy and the AOG need to do to play in the same game?"

Your AOG is clearly focused on answering these questions and developing a plan to attack our weaknesses. While there is much that we can do, it is also clear that this will need to be a joint effort with the Academy and the Air Force. We all have a substantial role to play if we are to successfully move forward in a positive new direction.

The motto of the last class to graduate, 2009, was "It's our time." I believe it is also our time to address our patent and detrimental shortcomings. For the first time in history, the Chief, the Vice, the A-1, and the majority of the Major Command commanders are Academy graduates. The Supt., the Vice, the Commandant, the Dean, the AD and the Air Base Wing Commander are all Academy graduates. The President & CEO of the AOG, the Executive Vice President, and the Senior Vice President for Alumni Affairs are all Academy graduates. With position comes power and with power comes obligation. We collectively have the obligation to do what is required to raise our beloved school to the superior level exemplified by our sister service academies. I promise that the AOG is firmly committed to doing its part. Stand by for more to come on this issue in the near future. Go Air Force! 