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PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

Operationalizing the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome through the National Character and Leadership Symposium

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies institutional outcome at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) and highlights the connection between the outcome and the 2024 National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) theme. Each year, the symposium provides the USAFA community and visitors the opportunity to learn from and engage with nationally recognized speakers. Interactions allow participants to contemplate not only the importance of valuing the human condition but also engage concertedly and compassionately with others. Every four years, the NCLS theme is rooted in the institutional outcome of the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies. This year's theme places particular emphasis on precisely the need to know oneself, know others, and to elevate performance through

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constructive engagement to make a difference, namely learning what each can and must do to value the human condition and human beings. The authors explore how USAFA operationalizes the importance of understanding the human condition as participants transition from the academic classroom to the field to the Air Force and Space Force.

Keywords: Leadership, Human Condition, NCLS, Outcome, USAFA

Introduction

“I not only think we can make a difference; we need to make a difference!” When a cadet shared the foregoing words after the National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) 2020’s closing Challenge Ceremony (the last time NCLS had the Human Condition Outcome as its focus), we knew it was a success. For the purpose of this outcome, as well as the very reason for NCLS directly addressing this important theme, is not merely to learn and contemplate valuing the human condition but engaging concertedly and compassionately with other human beings as valuable and unique individuals. NCLS 2024 once again has as its focus the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome, and its theme this year places particular emphasis on precisely the need “to make a difference,” namely learning what each can and must do to value the human condition and human beings. The following paper’s intent, therefore, is not only to explain what the outcome entails and how it relates to the United States Air Force Academy’s (USAFA) mission to develop leaders of character but to inspire the reader to prepare themselves to actively engage with NCLS 2024. For those unable to attend the symposium in person, may the following examination of this topic encourage the reader to make use of the many and varied resources that will be available through the upcoming symposium to contemplate, reflect on, and apply all that is entailed with “valuing Human Conditions, Cultures, and Societies.” After reviewing the history of the outcome and discussing its current formulation as well as the theme of

NCLS 2024, the essay closes with a challenge of its own: namely to make the most of this year’s symposium by asking what each of us can and needs to do to make a difference with respect to valuing each other.

USAFA’s institutional outcomes have undergone several iterations over the past decade plus, from 19 often vague and overlapping outcomes in 2009 to the current, focused set of 9 outcomes¹:

1. Critical Thinking
2. Application of Engineering Problem-Solving Methods
3. Scientific Reasoning and the Principles of Science
4. The Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies
5. Leadership, Teamwork, and Organizational Management
6. Clear Communication
7. Ethics and Respect for Human Dignity
8. National Security of the American Republic
9. Warrior Ethos as Airmen and Citizens

The Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome itself derives from two interrelated original outcomes from 2009, namely the *Intercultural Competence and Involvement Outcome*, which was grouped under the category of Responsibilities and the *Civic, Cultural, and International Environments Outcome*, which was grouped under the category

¹ For a more in-depth description of each of the outcomes, please go to: <https://www.usafa.edu/academics/outcomes/>

of Knowledge (United States Air Force Academy [USAFA], 2009). The knowledge component was the foundational element; responsibility was the impact resulting from implementation. There were also what were called warrior skills, which were the means knowledge would result operationalized in responsibilities. The reason for this brief historical jaunt is to illuminate that the original structural categories have been retained in each of the current outcomes, which include components that involve cadets achieving sufficient knowledge, per the focus of the outcome, which are then translated into skills with an eye to responsible engagement.

Indeed, the current Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome's driving parameters involve both the knowledge and skills related to knowing oneself and knowing others to facilitate precisely the type of thoughtful, constructive engagement required of today's air and space leaders. It is important to note that the criticality of this particular outcome spans the gamut from the interpersonal to the global. As will be developed in greater detail in what follows, whether an airman is engaging with someone in their unit, whose ethnic or religious background is different from their own, or a guardian involved in a joint operation with an ally, whose cultural paradigms evince important distinctions from their own, the ability to promote effective intercultural engagement will of necessity involve cross-culturally attuned insights that value both one's own and another's cultural and social milieu.

Although each of the nine outcomes is foundational to the education, training, mentoring, and developing of officers and leaders of character, a strong case can be made that the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome is itself foundational to all the other outcomes. In simple terms: without one understanding who one is, one cannot act meaningfully – identity precedes activity. All the other outcomes overtly deal with key human activities such as politics, ethics, officership-statesmanship, and science, technology, engi-

neering and mathematics (aka STEM) exploration and implementation, all of which draw on the functionally empowering Outcomes dealing with critical thinking and clear communication. While critical thinking and clear communication are important foundational means, their employment depends on the individual first and foremost knowing who they are and then knowing the person or people with whom they are engaging. This necessarily involves critical thinking, but one must first have a thought about which to think, critically or otherwise. And the ability to clearly communicate what one thinks or feels involves precisely an attunement to the human condition and the cultures and societies in which human beings live. The critical component of constructive and compassionate engagement will invariably follow when good and necessary distinctions are made that reflect verities that are universal or culturally conditioned and situated. Although the foregoing adumbrations will be developed in greater detail by the authors, the essential point is worth retaining at the forefront of the mind's eye: who one is and understands oneself to be is critical to seeing and understanding another, which is critical to nurture the element of all morally meaningful activity, namely doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reasons.

USAFA's vision is to be the Air Force's premier institution for developing leaders of character. The implementation of this vision is USAFA's mission, namely educating, training, and inspiring men and women to lead the United States Air and Space Forces in service to our Nation by embracing our core values of integrity, service, and excellence. To meet this mission, a profound appreciation of the human condition in its cultural and social complexities is not merely a nicety but a necessity. That is to say, to effectively engage with both allies and competitors regionally and internationally requires a profound awareness of others in light of an equally profound awareness of oneself. Coherent action only proceeds from a coherent identity, which takes into account the identity of one's interlocutor – per the out-

come: self-knowledge, other knowledge; constructive, meaningful engagement.

The foregoing is codified in USAFA Manual 36-3526, *Developing Leaders of Character at USAFA*. As the seminal part of this governing document, the Leader of Character Framework “provides all Academy personnel, military and civilian, with a deliberate, flexible, and foundational conceptual framework to use in developing themselves and others” (USAFA, 2022, p. 5). Specifically, the Framework operationalizes the USAFA vision and mission by defining what a Leader of Character is and shaping a cadet into someone who:

- Lives honorably by consistently practicing the virtues embodied in the Core Values;
- Lifts others to their best possible selves; and
- Elevates performance toward a common and noble purpose.

The Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome plays a critical role in the foregoing. Cadets must embody the core values as part of their self-knowledge. Then and only then can they lift others to become their best possible selves, which by definition entails the other knowledge. In turn, constructive engagement follows as one strives to elevate collective performance to a common, noble purpose. In sum, the purpose of the Human Condition outcome is to help tomorrow’s air and space leaders learn to value not only their own particular situatedness but that of others as well. Doing so will be critical to domestic and foreign engagement that places a high value on nurturing a more peaceable and amicable world.

The Center for Character and Leadership Development

Given USAFA’s primary strategic goal of developing leaders of character in service to our nation (USAFA, 2021), the Center for Character and Leadership

Development (CCLD) is the primary integrator to accomplish this goal. CCLD serves USAFA by advancing character and leadership development in preparation for service to the nation across many educational, training, and experiences (ETEs) throughout the 47-month cadet course of instruction. These ETEs, which include academics; military training; athletics; and character and leadership development, serve as developmental steppingstones through which members pursue the growth of their own identity by engaging in purposeful experiences and practicing habits of thought and action (USAFA, 2022). In addition, the specific ETEs associated with the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies institutional outcome, as well as the other eight outcomes, are the “the means through which we develop others and ourselves in purposeful and engaging ways” (USAFA, 2022, p. 9).

One of the developmental experiences that aligns directly with the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies outcome is the NCLS. Held annually each February, NCLS is the Academy’s flagship character and leadership event, which brings together distinguished scholars, military leaders, corporate executives, and world-class athletes to inspire, motivate, and equip 6,500 participants for honorable living and effective leadership.

Each year, the NCLS theme rotates among four of the nine USAFA institutional outcomes: (1) Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies, (2) Warrior Ethos as Airmen and Citizens, (3) Ethics and Respect for Human Dignity, and (4) Leadership, Teamwork, and Organizational Management. The NCLS 2024 theme, Valuing Human Conditions, Cultures, and Societies, explores the complexities of what it means to be human, and the qualities exemplified by admirable citizens and leaders. As an extension of this institutional outcome, selected speakers are invited to focus their presentations on the common experiences, emotions, and challenges we all share as humans.

As citizens of unique societies and cultures, symposium speakers examine how human commonalities and different perspectives come together to build connections and create effective leaders and teams, often by sharing their personal stories of struggle and success. In this global and interconnected environment, it is important to understand that success results from understanding ourselves and others, and that teams work best when all members feel valued and respected. Through NCLS, USAFA takes the opportunity to engage in purposeful experiences to develop leaders of character by taking the time to appreciate viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives other than our own. The implementation of this in the personal and professional life of the attendees is then to *Live Honorably, Lift Others* as fellow human beings seeking to understand and better live what it means to be human and *Elevate Performance*.

In addition to the four rotating themes, the NCLS committee of faculty, officers, staff, and cadets selects a marketing tagline each year that connects the strategic-level theme with what is going on day-to-day across the cadet wing. This year, cadets chose *Embrace Culture. Empower People #NCLS2024*, which highlights the importance of actively creating and fostering a culture of dignity, respect, and accountability. This emphasizes the importance of leaders and leader-developers recognizing and celebrating the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of individuals and global communities with the goal of creating respectful, cohesive communities. According to Cadet First Class Rachel Parillo, the NCLS 2024 Cadet-in-Charge:

Embracing culture represents making informed decisions, based on understanding, experience, and knowledge and being open to learning more about cultures and perspectives different from our own. Whereas, empowering people recognizes each person's unique strengths, abilities, and perspectives, and using that knowledge to advocate for their

opportunity to thrive. (personal communication, November 26, 2023)

Such perspective speaks to how USAFA seeks to empower all members of the Academy through the institution's *Let's Be Clear* campaign focused squarely on preventing unhealthy behaviors, responding to harm courageously, and accelerating accountability (USAFA, 2023). "Embrace Culture. Empower People #NCLS2024" challenges NCLS participants to think about how the complexities entailed in leadership influence the way we navigate the human condition. It is a call to action for leaders and leader-developers to create and nurture a culture of inclusion, respect, and empowerment where everyone feels valued, supported, and inspired to contribute to the mission's success.

The Human Condition as One of Six Outcomes

With the foregoing in mind, a more robust discussion of the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome can now transpire with an eye to elucidating how the vision and mission are implemented in concrete goals. The three pillars of the Outcome are: (1) know oneself (thyself), (2) know others, and (3) constructive engagement. Let us begin by considering the first in some depth.

At the Oracle of Delphi, ancient Greece's most important religious site, the visitor is confronted on the portico with the inscription, *Know Thyself*. What does it mean to know oneself? With respect to the human condition, to know what it means to be human entails knowing first and foremost what a human being is not. And what is a human being not? A human being is neither a god nor a beast. Bound by time and space, man is mortal, with limited knowledge about the world in which he lives and moves, and with limited abilities, all too often none at all, to (re)shape the cosmos, the world, and other human beings in his or her own image. Man

is not a god. And yet man is not merely an animal, a beast. Human beings have volition and the capability to reason between choices, choosing the better and leaving off from the worse. Humanity, at its better moments, is capable of acting reasonably. But what does it mean to act reasonably?

In *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Aristotle discusses that each thing has a *telos* – an end for which it is designed and the pursuit of which alone allows for a thing’s fulfillment, which is to say its wellness, completeness, and, for human beings, happiness. Living in accordance with the *telos* of human excellence – doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason (Aristotle, 1999) – a human being becomes truly human and exercises his or her liberty as a being beholden to the knowledge of the good. Herein lies the foundational – the critical – step to learning to know oneself, namely learning what one is not and, by extension, intimating what one is, or might become, if one lets oneself pursue one’s *telos*. Although there is an objective and universal component to this type of self-knowledge, it needs to be stated that for any such knowledge to become effective for a given individual, it must become one’s own, and this must transpire in one’s own particular way. That is to say, whatever is absolute about the human condition, each human being must embrace it as an individual and each will do so in ways that are unique to the particular person they are. This must not only be understood but valued and nurtured.

What this means for cadets at USAFA is understanding that as human beings they are not merely citizens in a republic but officer-candidates, who will soon take on the noble commission of being officer-statesmen charged with the duty of protecting and defending the republic against all enemies, foreign and domestic. This telescoping trinity of identities is the Leader of Character framework by which USAFA graduates will in time become tomorrow’s air and space leaders as commissioned officers.

When one examines the proficiencies undergirding the first pillar of *Know Oneself to Live Honorably*, one recognizes their interplay. If cadets are able to understand what it means to be a human being, a citizen in a republic, and an officer-statesmen in the Air and Space Force (Proficiency #1) in light of understanding the various factors that have shaped their identity (Proficiency #2), both with respect to objective and subjective elements entailed in identity (Proficiency 3), they can then offer a robust critique and defense of their own identity (Proficiency 4). Such self-knowledge is the first critical step in being able to begin the process of considering the varied similarities and differences that allow us to properly value another, having first properly evaluated ourselves.

What has been discussed in terms of self-knowledge can and must now be applied in the same manner to others in the same order as it unfolds for one’s self. The second pillar of *Know Others to Lift Others* and the two corresponding proficiencies are merely the application of the foregoing to fellow human beings. Proficiencies #3 (Describe key elements of an identity different from one’s own) and #4 (Explain historical, cultural, social, and political developments that have shaped another’s identity and worldview) of *Know Others to Lift Others* are then parallel to Proficiencies #1 and #2 of *Know Oneself to Live Honorably*. The individual’s attunement to their own identity informs their ability to describe key elements in another’s identity, explain the milieu that shaped their identity, make good and necessary comparisons and distinctions between objective (universally true) and subjective (biased) elements of another’s identity, and defend or critique both objective and subjective elements of their identity.

It is best to understand these two pillars of this Outcome (namely self-knowledge and other knowledge) not as chronologically linked – first self-knowledge and then other knowledge – but as intertwined and requiring interplay at each stage. It is a truism of the human

condition that one learns about the cosmos, the world, and oneself through comparison and contrast with other things and other people, as if one were looking in a mirror of sorts that reflects back to the observer both the appearance of things and, if the mirror is of superior quality, the reality of things, at least as best as human beings can discern this. As Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) observes of the importance of civic institutions to the maintenance of a democratic republic, “Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another” (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 152). This applies to all areas of human existence but especially as it relates to self-knowledge and other knowledge. The principle of contrariety, and by extension the principle of congruity, which undergirds the ability to make reasonable and meaningful comparisons and contrasts with and between things, is a fundamental tenant of human existence. The ability to utilize these principles effectively determines one’s ability to grow in terms of self-knowledge, which is ever in relation to the other knowledge.

The third pillar, *Elevate Performance through Constructive Engagement*, is best seen as the application of the first two knowledge pillars. That is, as already stated earlier, correct action presupposes correct knowledge – who we are determines what we will do, if we are seeking to act reasonably and coherently and not blithely and spastically. This applies to personal and professional interactions and equally to the life of individuals no less than to the life of states.

Constructive engagement then requires an individual to first “explain the uniqueness and interconnections of various peoples, cultures, and societies in their appropriate spatial and temporal contexts” (Proficiency #5), and then to “respond prudently to various cultural and social scenarios, settings, and situations, whether in the classroom or in the field” (Proficiency #6). The ability to respond effectively to the geo-political complexities

on an international scale and to the socio-cultural complexities of human interactions on an interpersonal scale both presuppose the ability to explain what unites and divides human beings such that mankind may constructively engage at the right time in the right way for the right reasons.

Another way of understanding this is in terms of what is referred to as intercultural knowledge and cross-cultural competency. The former overlays with the first two pillars of this outcome (self and other knowledge) and the latter with constructive engagement. Understanding oneself and another is central to intercultural knowledge, and the ability to effectively interact across cultures is the heart of cross-cultural competency. With respect to the education and training of USAFA cadets, this entails preparing cadets in the classroom to effectively interact with others across the spectrum of their activities, both personal and professional. For instance, a cadet learning about self and others as a German language minor would have the opportunity to engage with the people and culture he or she has been studying while participating in a target country and language immersion program. Returning to the classroom, this individual has now not only studied about self and others but has gained life experiences related to both and would, ideally, bring this learning and these experiences back to the classroom to enrich the learning environment for all. In turn, this individual might go on a longer semester exchange, or participate as a commissioned officer in the Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP) – the Air Force’s premier language learning program for officers.

From the classroom to the field to the operational Air and Space Force, such a student-officer is truly a life-long learner. Examining propositions about what it means to be a human being situated in a particular culture and society, such an individual testing various hypotheses in the field, and through a continuous loop of learning and living embodies precisely the type of life-long learner the institution desires to nurture.

It is important to keep in mind that the institution's primary educational and application focus here with respect to the knowledge and engagement of USAFA's cadets resides with what is generally understood to be the operational level. That is, the tactical level constitutes the day-to-day usage of language and its corresponding actions by which we both learn about ourselves and others and learn to engage constructively. This requires a strategic vision, enshrined at USAFA as being the Air Force's premier institution for developing leaders of character (United States Air Force Academy, 2021). All that transpires at the operational level is the lynchpin that takes the strategic vision and ensures that our tactical engagement is meaningful. The work of the institution's educators, trainers, coaches, leaders, and mentors is to assist cadets in acquiring the cognitive and experiential tools that at once allow them to contemplate the strategic vision while finding *ground truth* implementation in daily thought and deed. Akin to the interactive loop that constitutes the classroom to the field to the operational force model, the interplay between the strategic and tactical by means of the operational is a powerful means to develop cadets to do the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reasons. When people talk about the importance of valuing others even as they value themselves via constructive engagement, the exploration of the human condition in terms of self-knowledge and other knowledge is of undeniable importance.

Courses Linked to Proficiencies

The foregoing framework and all that it entails remains sterile unless implemented. Here USAFA's educators across all mission elements play a key role. A highly effective teacher can enliven an ordinary discipline, whereas a less effective instructor can do the opposite. With respect to the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome – as well as the other eight USAFA institutional outcomes – in order for cadets to meet the institution's expectation of achieving mastery of the

outcomes, having highly effective instruction is critical. Thus, it is important to examine the various courses that contribute to this outcome as well as why and how they play a role in cadets' education. Previous research has shown that transformational leadership behaviors can be developed in courses or training programs (e.g. Dvir et al., 2002; Kelloway et al., 2000). One of the main tasks of the Outcome team is to find creative, effective means to ensure transformational leadership transpires in the classroom, which intentionally develops a cadet's thought and encourages their actions to ever and always valuing human beings as unique individuals. The courses directly involved in the Human Condition Outcome are continuously making improvements with the foregoing foremost in mind.

At present, the following academic courses are linked to this outcome (listed in order of level) and categorized within the three pillars of the Leader of Character framework: Know Oneself to Live Honorably, Know Others to Lift Others, and Elevate Performance through Constructive Engagement.

- Foreign Language 131–132: Basic Sequence. As part of the academic core that all cadets must take or validate (i.e. test out of), these introductory courses are taught in one of the eight languages offered at USAFA: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. These courses align with three proficiencies, which fall under the pillars of Know Others to Lift Others (Proficiency #3) and Elevate Performance through Constructive Engagement (Proficiencies #5 and #6).
- History 300: World History. The course addresses the aforementioned three proficiencies and examines connections between human societies around the globe and their development over the past thousand years. Cadets learn to describe, identify, and explain the uniqueness and interconnectedness of cultures, peoples, and societies in both their spatial and temporal contexts.

- Behavioral Science 360: Sociology. This course addresses the first four of the Outcome's six proficiencies, which are under the pillars of Know Oneself to Live Honorably (Proficiencies #1 and #2) and Know Others to Lift Others (Proficiencies #3 and #4). This course examines connections between the cadet's background and identity in terms of American society at large by scrutinizing cadets' lives while exploring the impact of a variety of social phenomena (e.g. culture, power, race, and gender).
- English 411: War Stories. This course focuses on Proficiencies #3 and #4 as categorized under the Know Others to Lift Others pillar of the Leader of Character framework. Focus is placed the intellectual and moral aspects of war as expressed in the literature of the profession of arms.
- Geography 412: World Cultural Geography. The course focuses on Proficiencies #3, #5 and #6. Whereas the third proficiency is part of the Know Others to Lift Others pillar, the latter two are classified as part of the Elevate Performance through Constructive Engagement pillar. The course focuses on the major world regions by considering five themes: cultural coherence and diversity, environment, population and settlement patterns, geopolitical fragmentation, and unity and economic and social development.
- Department of International Programs: Cadet Intercultural Competence. Each year cadets apply for, and if selected, participate in study abroad programs in a variety of countries where the target languages are taught in the Department of Foreign Languages or participate in cultural immersions irrespective of language ability. Cadets' intercultural competence ("one's ability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adjust behavior to cultural difference and commonalities," DiBiasio et al., 2023) is measured before departing the United States and again when they return to gauge gains in their ability to function effectively across cultures. Using the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (Hammer, 1999), the measurement of cadet

intercultural competence falls under Proficiencies #1, #3, #5, and #6, which fall under all three pillars of the Leader of Character framework.

NCLS 2024 and the Path Forward

In light of the foregoing and given the focus on the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Outcome for NCLS 2024, the symposium will be a tremendous opportunity for cadets, professors, military trainers, visitors, and Air and Space Force leaders to engage constructively on a plethora of topics related to what it means to be human as citizens of a great republic as well as officer-statesmen.

Prior to the start of NCLS 2024, it is worthwhile for all participants to spend quality time contemplating what it all means personally and vocationally in the profession of arms. Researching speakers of interest prior to the symposium will provide important contextualizing information about the speakers' backgrounds and lived experiences as well as the substance of the upcoming presentation. Such information will clearly enhance in-person interactions and discussions with the speakers. Further, once the symposium concludes, self-reflection, contemplation and discussions among NCLS participants should not end. It is arguably an essential activity given not only the importance of the outcome, but the world USAFA cadets will be entering as commissioned officers.

"Whether in the classroom, on the parade or training grounds, or on the athletic fields of friendly strife – let alone the fields of not so friendly strife that along with the geo-political realities of our world comprise the civil-military spectrum – self-knowledge in relation to other knowledge, resulting in constructive engagement, is the only truly viable means of striving to create a better tomorrow" (Steeves, 2020, p. 16).

Lifelong learning is critical to human growth, and NCLS 2024 can be a launchpad for critical think-

ing and understanding of the human condition. The authors recommend that attendees and speakers continue to question what it means to be human, citizens of the American republic, and officer-statesmen dedicated to protecting and defending the Constitution of the United States of America.

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