

Critiquing the US Air Force Academy's Core

Does It Satisfy the Need?

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To prepare the nation's future Air and Space Force officers for tomorrow's wars, the US Air Force Academy must arm its graduates with the right balance of practical military skills and academic knowledge. A review of the Academy's current core curriculum reveals the need for a stronger foundation in the humanities, particularly in the study of history and literature. For these curriculum changes to occur, the Academy must meet the challenges to the status quo, including the reduction in civilian faculty, department parochialism, and the Academy's shift from an academic focus. Although warfighting skills are crucial, an understanding of the nature and character of war is what will ultimately define successful warrior-leaders of tomorrow.

In the Spring 2025 edition of *Checkpoints*, the quarterly magazine of the US Air Force Academy's (USAFA) Association of Graduates, Academy Superintendent Lieutenant General Tony D. Bauernfeind wrote, "We are in a Time of Consequence, facing threats from every corner of the world and in all domains. . . . At the end of their 47 months at our USAFA, our cadets will be the warrior-leaders our Nation deserves."¹

Bauernfeind, a distinguished graduate from USAFA's class of 1991, rightly notes the challenges awaiting today's new lieutenants. He is also correct that the United States must have competent military leadership to negate the multitude of global dangers that it faces. Yet his assumption that graduates will have received the necessary education to serve as the "warrior-leaders our Nation deserves" merits examination, especially in terms of whether USAFA's core curriculum provides a solid foundation for the world that graduates will encounter.

Without a doubt, military studies and the associated training directed by the commandant of cadets are essential features of a service academy. Physical fitness is necessary as well. But how much time those components take from a cadet's day in comparison to how much involves academics also matters a great deal. As Bauernfeind observes, a cadet will spend almost four years at USAFA, and that time must be allocated to yield the maximum return on producing the best possible warrior-leaders.

The Academy's recently revised mission statement reads, "To forge leaders of character, motivated to a lifetime of service, and developed to lead our Air Force and Space Force

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1. Tony Bauernfeind, "Warrior Leaders Ready on Day 1," *Checkpoints*, March 2025, 14, 16.

as we fight and win our Nation's wars."² This is an update of the previous statement: "To educate, train and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the U.S. Air Force and Space Force in service to our nation." Some critics of the new statement have bemoaned the absence of the word "educate"; yet regardless of whether the word appears, education remains the fundamental bedrock for creating a successful warrior-leader.³

The increasingly complex demands of twenty-first-century warfare underscore the level of intellectual development and flexibility of mind required of all future officers. For young men and women aged 18 to 22 years, an academic education is the most vital component of the months that they will spend in the foothills of the Rockies. Accordingly, it must receive the most time. The key concern, though, is how the time for academics should be allocated.

As a RAND analysis has suggested, USAFA's core curriculum emphasizes that the Air Force's foundation rests on technology, true as well for the recently created Space Force.⁴ It notes, "The Air Force could be said to worship at the altar of technology," and such a focus "will ensure an open-ended future for flight (in airplanes and spacecraft) that, in turn, will ensure the future of the Air Force . . . [and] the continued expansion of flight-related technologies."⁵ Thus, for USAFA to grant bachelor of science degrees in all disciplines makes sense. Graduates must understand the basics of how air and spacecraft function, along with specifics regarding both offensive and defensive weaponry that the two services can employ or that opponents can employ against them. Consequently, a fundamental knowledge of how the key components of the services work is essential for a new Air or Space Force officer.

More important, though, is a basic understanding of why those lethal elements might be useful in a given situation. The Air Force has the capability to place a "smart" munition in a single room of a structure that might house enemy leaders. Yet American decisionmakers, both political and military, must carefully consider the potential and unintended consequences of such an action, and the likelihood that the outcome might actually make the situation worse than it was before. In that regard, a greater emphasis on the humanities would benefit all Academy graduates.

Granted, new lieutenants may not immediately have to face such decisions, but cadets should certainly debate the pros and cons of lethal actions as a part of academic discussions. An essential component of a warfighter's psyche is to understand the essence of war, to include why it is fought, its definition of victory, and its indispensable "exit" considerations.

2. "Motivated to Lead: Academy Mission," US Air Force Academy [USAFA, website], accessed 8 July 2025, <https://www.usafa.edu/>.

3. Mary Shinn, "New Air Force Academy Mission Statement Drops 'Educate,' Adds a Different Focus," *The Denver Gazette*, updated 27 May 2025, <https://gazette.com/>.

4. Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

5. Builder, *Masks of War*, 19.

If cadets do not grasp those notions, the United States risks making the mistake of Germany prior to 1945—developing officers who excel tactically and operationally, and who can produce seemingly sound war plans, but fail to provide strategic clarity to the civilian leadership because they are not equipped, from the beginning, to understand the nature and character of war despite their warfighting skills.

American warfighters must further appreciate that victory has different definitions that change from one conflict to the next. Foreign languages, philosophy, literature, law, and history offer valuable insights into deciphering the factors that cause nation-states—and non-state actors—to react in a particular manner to different provocations. The latter four of those disciplines further reveal the notions that have shaped what eminent historian Russell F. Weigley called the “American Way of War” and the impact that those ideas have had on past American military operations and portend for the future.⁶ He argued that since 1861, a “strategy of annihilation” has been a chief characteristic of America’s approach to armed conflict, along with “the problem of how to secure victory in its desired fullness without paying a cost so high that the cost would mock the very enterprise of waging war.”⁷ The desire to destroy an opponent’s capability and will to fight, and to do so at a minimal cost in terms of both money and manpower, has remained a guiding principle in the nation’s wars since Vietnam.

This article contends that the Academy faces a crisis regarding its core curriculum. While Academy graduates must be armed with essential warfighting skills, their success in future conflicts hinges on having a solid foundation in the humanities. Those disciplines provide the necessary understanding and appreciation of the moral, ethical, cultural, and sociopolitical aspects of war, all crucial concerns of a warrior-leader. Yet restructuring USAFA’s core curriculum to include more humanities courses will not be easy. Civilian staff cuts, departmental parochialism, and an administrative shift away from academics toward training all present obstacles to changing the core. Yet, if the Academy is to succeed in its mission of producing competent warrior-leaders, the core must change.

Core Curriculum

The US Air Force Academy prides itself on its history of producing well-rounded officers with a broad-based liberal education. It distinguishes itself from other service academies as offering a “collaborative blending of rigorous academics, military training, character and leadership development, and competitive athletics” that cadets need “to succeed as airmen, guardians, and citizens.”⁸

6. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Macmillan Publishing, 1973).

7. Weigley, *American Way*, xxii.

8. “At the Center of Inquiry: Core Curriculum,” USAFA, accessed 28 May 2025, <https://www.usafa.edu/>; and “Academic Outcomes,” USAFA, accessed 9 July 2025, <https://www.usafa.edu/>.

This blend is evident in its academic program. In the four-year span culminating with the 2024–2025 academic year, all cadets, regardless of their majors, took 29 required semester-long courses spread across a variety of academic disciplines plus military studies and physical fitness. Those courses comprised USAFA's core curriculum—molded by the superintendent, the dean of faculty, and the department heads—to assure proficiency in achieving nine “institutional outcomes”: critical thinking, engineering, principles of science, the human condition, leadership, clear communication, ethics and respect, national security, and the warrior ethos.⁹ The majority of core courses consisted of engineering, science, and social science. The humanities—those academic disciplines that examine the human condition by exploring culture, history, language, and the arts—received much less attention.

In the standard course sequencing, freshmen took only core courses, consisting of between 13.5 and 17.5 semester hours and 13 courses total, unless they had validation or transfer credit. Of those core courses, only four were from the humanities: two in foreign language, one in English, and one in history. The remaining core courses addressed science, mathematics, and social science, along with military studies and physical education. Similar core requirements confronted sophomores, who, like freshmen, took only four humanities core courses—history, English, philosophy, and law.¹⁰ (Although considered a social science by the Academy, “law” in this article is considered one of the humanities, given its focus on critiquing human behavior, its basis in cultural and historical factors, and its ties to philosophical notions about justice and morality.)

Juniors and seniors, most of whom could now take majors courses, still had a majority of core requirements outside of the humanities. Junior cadets had no humanities requirements, while seniors had just one—a course in philosophy—although seniors who majored in humanities disciplines could count certain electives in their major to help fulfill core requirements. For the juniors and seniors majoring in engineering, basic science, or mathematics, however, their exposure to the humanities was minimal if they took only the required core courses.

Cadets typically graduate with a total of 134 to 149 semester hours. The minimum graduation requirements are 128 semester hours of academic coursework, five semester hours of physical education, and the completion of four character and leadership programs as well as professional military education and leadership laboratory courses. Most academic majors require between 134 and 143 semester hours.¹¹ In contrast, the US Military Academy at West Point requires a minimum of 120 academic hours, while the US Naval Academy at Annapolis states that “in general, midshipmen must complete a minimum of

9. “Core Curriculum.”

10. “Core Curriculum.”

11. Hal Taylor, USAFA Registrar's Office, telephone conversation with author, 20 June 2025; and see also “Core Curriculum”; and “Graduating from the Academy: Curriculum,” USAFA, accessed 19 June 2025, <https://www.usafa.edu/>.

137 semester hours.” Both service academies have physical education, professional military education, and character-building requirements similar to those at USAFA.¹²

At the time of this writing, the core curriculum for cadets entering in the 2025–2026 academic year has yet to be finalized but in all likelihood will resemble the requirements guiding the 2024–2025 curriculum. The changes proposed in this article should be implemented by the start of the 2026–2027 academic year to ensure that USAFA’s graduates are adequately—and rapidly—prepared to face the challenging environments that they will encounter. Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia—regions with ongoing conflicts—are all potential destinations for new lieutenants; Russia, China, and North Korea could also produce turmoil that triggers American military action. The sooner that the recommended core modifications occur, the better prepared Academy graduates will be to deal with the trials that await.

Humanities Core

The humanities courses comprising the US Air Force Academy’s core are vital components of a graduate’s education.

Foreign Languages

The way in which a potential enemy—or ally—organizes and expresses their thoughts discloses much about how that entity will approach war. “Languages are the pedigrees of nations,” Samuel Johnson wrote in 1773, and that observation remains valid in the twenty-first century.¹³ USAFA requires two semesters of a foreign language to provide cadets with a basic understanding of how thoughts are formed and expressed outside of English. Those courses count toward providing proficiency in achieving USAFA’s institutional outcome of a better understanding of the human condition. That knowledge includes a focus on one of eight “strategic languages,” with Arabic, Chinese, and Russian comprising three of the eight. Cadets who take more than the two required courses can earn a foreign language minor in addition to their academic major.

Philosophy

Philosophy is also essential to a cadet’s understanding of the world that they will face as an officer. Core courses in that discipline help fulfill the institutional objective of providing a better appreciation of ethics and respect. USAFA currently requires all cadets to take two philosophy courses: a course on ethics during the sophomore year and “Comparative

12. “Part 1: The Academic Program,” US Military Academy, accessed 19 June 2025, <https://courses.westpoint.edu/>; and “Transcript Explanation,” US Naval Academy, Office of the Registrar, accessed 19 June 2025, <https://usna.edu/>.

13. James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL. D.* (1785; Classic Literature Library), 73, <https://classic-literature.co.uk/>.

Religion” during the senior year. The sophomore course provides “a critical study of several major moral theories and their application to contemporary moral problems with special emphasis on the moral problems of the [military] profession” and highlights the “civic, cultural, and international contexts in which the U.S. military operates.”¹⁴ The senior course examines the “faith traditions” of the world’s major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, providing a basic understanding of the central religious tenets in the disparate environments where graduates will serve.¹⁵

Law

Rather than placing the core Law 220, “Law for Department of the Air Force Officers,” in the ethics and respect category of institutional outcomes, the dean labels it as a required course to promote critical thinking. The course, which “covers general law knowledge and constitutional topics through examination of case law and texts,” also develops communication and problem-solving skills through case study analysis. Students are given instruction on “how an area of law works in society, followed by its military application.”¹⁶ No doubt the class also addresses ethics and respect in its discussions, but placing it in the critical thinking category of institutional outcomes—along with core courses in economics and statistics—displays USAFA’s inherent focus on science, engineering, and math. In addition, as the single law course in the core, and one designed to prepare cadets to serve as officers, it would seem better suited as a course for seniors rather than one for sophomores as it now stands. Still, regardless of where it appears in the curriculum, it is an essential part of officer development.

English

Two English courses also bolster the core, and both fall in the clear communication category of USAFA’s institutional outcomes. Freshmen take the first, “Composition and Research,” while sophomores take the second, “Intermediate Composition and Introduction to Literature.” Clear writing is certainly a skill that every officer must have. The study of literature, though, receives comparatively scant attention, and that focus is one that would further speak to the human condition institutional outcome. The English department once offered a core course for seniors, “War Stories,” but that course is now offered only as an elective that fails to garner the widespread participation that it received when part of the core. The course focuses on novels about the military, with many written by combat veterans. One former member of the faculty stated that three novels—*Once an Eagle* by Anton Myrer (1968), *The Conversion of Chaplain Cohen* by Herbert Tarr (1963), and *The Lionheads* by Josiah Bunting (1972)—shaped his concept of selfless leadership.

14. *Course of Instruction Handbook*, effective Fall 2024 (USAFA, 2024), <https://www.usafa.edu/>.

15. *Course of Instruction*, 428.

16. Randy Roughton, “Law Class Gives Cadets Legal Tools They Will Need as Officers,” USAFA, accessed 3 June 2025, <https://www.usafa.edu/>.

Reinstating such a core requirement would not only help fulfill the institutional outcome of understanding the human condition but would also directly address the warrior ethos outcome.¹⁷ At present, the only academic core courses that satisfy that institutional outcome are History 100, "Military History," and Military Strategic Studies 251, "Air Power and Joint Operations Strategy." The other courses conveying the warrior ethos are all physical education, which even includes choices of golf and pickleball for upper-class cadets.¹⁸ With the current superintendent's emphasis on creating warrior-leaders, War Stories should return as a foundational course in the core. Bauernfeind himself has stated, "War-fighting is not a job—it is a mindset."¹⁹ Making that course a requirement for all cadets would emphasize that conviction.

History

History is another critical component of the core. As famed Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz noted, the study of history involves an understanding of both physical and moral causes and effects, with the physical representing "the wooden hilt" of a sword, and the moral representing "the precision metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade." He argued that history "provides the strongest proof of the importance of moral factors and their often incredible effect: this is the noblest and most solid nourishment that the mind of a general may draw from a study of the past."²⁰

Before 1986, three history courses—world, American, and military—were required of all cadets. In that year, the requirement for American history disappeared, with the rationale being that cadets had already received a sufficient background in that course in high school. That belief has changed, as the superintendent recently decided to return American history to the core, but that decision also resulted in world history's removal as a core course—an error of equal magnitude to the omission of American history as a core requirement.

In short, these events all contributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin's paranoia that Western concepts and military might could ultimately bring Ukraine into NATO and the European Union, creating a potent enemy on his southern border—and to Putin's desire to create a new Russian empire. To help resolve that war in a satisfactory manner, American leaders at all levels must consider those factors from Russia's past.

Furthermore, junior officers as well as generals must be able to explain the rationale for their nation's actions to subordinates—and to allies and partners—because all of those wearing the uniform should understand why their country may ultimately put them in harm's way. America's national security faces threats from not only Russia, but also China,

17. Randy Roughton, "Cadets and War Stories: Studying War's Human Impact," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 7 October 2024, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

18. "Core Curriculum"; and *Course of Instruction*.

19. Bauernfeind, "Warrior Leaders," 14.

20. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter J. Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976), 184–185.

Iran, North Korea, and a proliferating number of terrorist entities, further highlighting the need for a knowledge of world history. America's military suffered from an ignorance of the historical and cultural background of Vietnam in the 1960s, and a similar hubris led to failures in Afghanistan and Iraq in the twenty-first century.

As an Air Force officer and former USAFA instructor who had served in Afghanistan writes, although military academy graduates are "educated as engineers and technicians," when they are deployed to countries like Iraq or Afghanistan, they must "negotiate the 'human terrain' of cultures utterly foreign to them." Without an understanding of the broad, sociohistorical context in which they exist, they are at a clear disadvantage: "Lacking knowledge of their own history as well as the history of the cultures they walk among, it is hardly surprising that they make little progress, despite hard work and honorable intentions."²¹ The recognition of this context's significance is not new. This imperative has been made by the world's greatest strategists across time, perhaps most notably Sun Tzu: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."²²

Likewise, American leaders—at all levels—must understand and appreciate the motivations of the nation's Allies. Israel's past reveals that its recent assault on Iran's leadership and nuclear facilities should not have been unexpected. The Israelis have demonstrated on numerous occasions that when they perceive an imminent threat to their survival, they will respond with lethal force. The 1967 Six Day War, the June 1981 attack on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad, and the September 2007 bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor at al-Kibar all illustrate Israel's willingness to resort to a first strike if deemed necessary to protect its populace.²³ A core course in world history, chronicling the rise of antisemitism that culminated in the Holocaust, the growth of the Zionist movement, and the Middle East tensions stemming from Israel's 1948 creation as a nation, should be an essential component of an Academy graduate's education.

As the June 2025 American attacks on Iran demonstrate, along with the 40,000 American service members serving in the Middle East, the new lieutenants comprising the Air and Space Forces have a high probability of encountering turmoil in the Middle East during their careers, and many will likely serve in that area. Without a required course in world history, they will not gain the background needed to operate successfully in that environment, because it is not provided elsewhere in the Academy's core curriculum. Moreover, they will be bereft of a broader understanding of world events.

21. W. J. Astore, "America's Military Academies Are Seriously Flawed," *Bracing Views*, 17 December 2014, <https://bracingviews.com/>.

22. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford University Press, 1963, 1971), 84.

23. See "Israel Admits Striking Suspected Syrian Nuclear Reactor in 2007," BBC News, 21 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

USAFA has tried to resolve the core world history dilemma by directing cadets who validate the new American history requirement to take world history instead. But that “fix” only compounds the problem. When American history was required by then-Superintendent Lieutenant General Michael Gould as a “trial core course” for all freshmen in academic year 2013–2014, only a small number of cadets placed out of it with high Advanced Placement (AP) American history test scores, which is likely to happen again. Of the 1,190 prospective cadets arriving in the summer of 2013 as future members of the class of 2017, just 115 (9.7 percent) had the AP test scores to validate it.²⁴ Thus, the current mandate will likely produce a majority of graduates without an understanding of world history, and that is unacceptable for future Air and Space Force leaders.

In the 2024–2025 academic year, all freshmen took military history, while sophomores took world history. Whether the history department can implement the new requirement for American history in the 2025–2026 academic year and whether the world history core course will in turn disappear for most cadets, remain uncertain at this juncture. Regardless—as is true at both West Point and Annapolis—three one-semester history courses should be centerpieces of USAFA’s core. In short, the Academy fails in its mission to produce competent officers unless its graduates have a basic background in their nation’s past, a fundamental knowledge of how history has shaped potential enemies and allies, and a sound comprehension of how the profession of arms has developed through the centuries. All are vital components of a future military leader’s education.

The core military history course already includes the superintendent’s desire for a focus on “managing operational risk,” as it stresses how all sides in past conflicts have sought to achieve their wartime goals while minimizing losses.²⁵ The emphasis on risk ties directly to the cultural and political foundations that guide each state—or non-state actor—in its behavior, notions reflected in American and world history core courses. In 1962, President John Kennedy highlighted the importance of understanding our nation’s past:

There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future.²⁶

That fundamental knowledge is critical for an American military officer.

24. Author communication with Brigadier General Mark Wells, USAF, Retired, former history department permanent professor and head.

25. Bauernfeind, “Warrior Leaders,” 15.

26. John F. Kennedy, “JFK Writes About Our Nation’s Memory,” *American Heritage* 59, no. 4 (2009), <https://www.americanheritage.com/>.

Challenges to Changing the Core

To initiate these crucial changes to the core curriculum, the US Air Force Academy must address three issues: the potential loss of civilian professors, the often-parochial views of Academy department chairs, and the superintendent's desire for additional training courses that do not necessarily have an academic focus.

During his confirmation hearing in January 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth called for removing many civilian professors at service academies and replacing them with military faculty. At the time of this writing, this initiative is underway. Currently, USAFA has 491 faculty members, of whom 308 (62.7 percent) are military and 183 (37.3 percent) are civilians.²⁷ In April 2025, Bauernfeind suggested cutting civilian faculty positions without hiring officers to replace them, to increase the military faculty's presence to 80 percent of the total.²⁸ He has also stated an interest in seeing these cuts for the Fall 2025 semester.²⁹

The Academy's Acting Dean of Faculty Colonel Steven Hasstedt announced in early July 2025 that USAFA would eliminate 140 civilian positions. That total included at least 50 civilian faculty members who had already departed through a voluntary deferred resignation program without their positions being backfilled.³⁰ "Involuntary separations" could then result through a reduction in force if the Academy fails to find additional funding to pay a \$10 million shortfall in fiscal year 2025 civilian pay.³¹

Such moves present several challenges. For one, civilian cuts risk eliminating a significant number of faculty members with doctorates, which could in turn jeopardize the Academy's ability to achieve accreditation. Secondly, suitable officers—particularly those with warfighting experience—to replace civilian faculty members can be difficult to recruit. To teach at USAFA, officers must have at least a master's degree and expertise in the desired academic discipline. During the Academy's first four decades, departments frequently sponsored selected officers to attend graduate school, with the Air Force footing the bill, likely negating substantial cost savings. Officers with a master's degree from a civilian university—earned typically within a year-and-a-half to two years—would spend two or three years teaching at USAFA, a process which removed them from their primary career field for four to five years.

This "time sink" is a concern for pilots and other officers in key warfighting specialties. Air Force leaders determined that the time lost from a new instructor's primary career field was too great, which was why civilian professors were considered a more efficient—

27. Mary Shinn, "Air Force Academy Superintendent Proposes Cutting Civilian Staff," *The Denver Gazette*, updated 2 May 2025, <https://gazette.com/>; and see also Jeff Arnold, "Air Force Leader Seeks Civilian Faculty Cuts: Report," *NewsNation*, 4 April 2025, <https://www.newsnationnow.com/>.

28. Shinn, "Superintendent"; and Arnold, "Faculty Cuts."

29. Mary Shinn, "Air Force Academy Eliminating 140 Positions, No Cuts to Majors Planned," *The Denver Gazette*, 6 July 2025, <https://gazette.com/>.

30. Brett Forrest, "Internal Email Confirms Air Force Academy Cutting 140 Civilian Staff, Facing \$10 Million Pay Shortage," *KOAA News5*, 3 July 2025, <https://www.koaa.com/>.

31. Forrest, "Internal Email."

and cheaper—alternative. The Air Force's severe pilot shortage—with 1,150 empty pilot billets in 2024 alone—further limits the likelihood that pilots will teach at the Academy.³²

In addition, civilian manpower losses would—according to the dean's office—likely result in eliminating some majors, because the faculty would have to focus on core courses, and majors' courses would receive secondary attention. As a former distinguished visiting civilian professor speculated, while upper-class cadets might be allowed to finish their majors, certain majors for current freshmen and sophomores might disappear, and programs with fewer than 15 cadets may be eliminated entirely.³³ Finally, the proposed loss of faculty members could tax the remaining faculty, who must cover current core courses as well as their own normal courseload.

In the meantime, a fair number of USAFA's civilian faculty are former Air Force officers, many of whom are Academy grads, well-versed in understanding—and relating to—the challenges that cadets face while attending USAFA. Those individuals have the background and experience exceeding that of active-duty Air Force officers, and their loss would be profoundly felt. Such expertise should be acknowledged and used to enhance the warrior ethos desired for faculty members. Relying on academically qualified retired officers would enable humanities departments to increase their staffing and thus, their core offerings.

Another impediment to changing the core is that the department heads—the colonels and tenured permanent professors of USAFA's academic departments—have a stake in what courses cadets are required to take. Department staffing results from the number of core courses offered along with the number of cadet majors in that discipline. Generally speaking, the more core courses offered, the more students—and hence more staff and funding—is directed to that department. While the superintendent, with recommendations from the dean, makes the final decision regarding the courses comprising the core, the department heads carry a great deal of weight in that determination.

USAFA's 21 academic departments fall within four overarching disciplines: basic sciences, comprising biology, chemistry, physics and meteorology, and mathematics; engineering, including aeronautics, astronautics, civil and environmental engineering, computer and cyber sciences, electrical and computer engineering, mechanical engineering, and systems engineering; humanities, consisting of languages and cultures, English and fine arts, history, and philosophy; and social sciences, comprising behavioral science and leadership, economics and geographical sciences, law, management, military strategic studies, and political science. Department heads from each of those disciplines serve as division chairs, and those four individuals traditionally have more sway in determining core courses than the other 17 department heads.

To modify the core, the dean asks for input from the department heads. Customarily, the department heads in basic sciences tend to support one another, as is also the case for

32. Shinn, "Superintendent"; and see Audrey Decker, "Pilot Shortage: New Report Calls for More Air Force Fighters and Larger Reserve," *Defense One*, 24 January 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/>.

33. Shinn, "Superintendent"; Decker, "Pilot Shortage"; and see also Shinn, "140 Positions."

those in engineering, the humanities, and social sciences. Given that 29 academic courses comprise the core curriculum, adding a core course for one department has usually meant that another department must surrender one. Given the impact on department manning, department heads are understandably loath to relinquish a course that bolsters their manpower. Still, with only nine core courses currently coming from the humanities, the addition of two more—War Stories and world history—would still leave a preponderance of basic sciences, engineering, and social sciences dominating the curriculum—while making USAFA’s new lieutenants better equipped to face the environment that they will encounter in the twenty-first century.

Bauernfeind wants to upgrade military training so that all cadets will enhance the warrior ethos by being prepared “to shoot, move, communicate, medicate, and automate.”³⁴ Although those skills are definitely desirable, their development should not take time away from academics. The preferred proficiencies could be achieved by devoting less attention to the “drill” that consists of squadrons marching around the terrazzo and more to weapons expertise and life-saving medical skills. In fact, Bauernfeind’s proposal to have the 40 cadet squadrons emphasize the A-staff functions that parallel real Air Force operational divisions is a sound one. It should help prepare cadets for the missions that they will face after graduation. As Bauernfeind states, “Through rigorous, adversary-focused military training, a nationally recognized academic program, and a culture of highly competitive athletics, we will develop graduates who exemplify unwavering courage and a deep commitment to honor and integrity.”³⁵ Such a vision for the Academy offers the balance of military skills and academics that would produce successful warrior-leaders of the future.

Conclusion

Revamping the US Air Force Academy’s core curriculum with additional humanities courses is necessary to ensure that the Academy produces the most thoroughly prepared graduates to serve as the future warrior-leaders of the Air and Space Forces. Doing so will not be easy. Inertia, and perhaps hostility, may come from some department heads, who may resist the idea of either adding or subtracting from their and their colleague’s current course load. USAFA will need to maintain a minimum faculty of 400 to ensure adequate coverage for core courses as well as to offer academic majors.³⁶ Modifications in the focus of military training may be necessary. Of special note, Brigadier General Linell A. Letendre, the dean of faculty since 2019, retired on 30 May 2025, and a new dean’s search has begun. In the interim, Bauernfeind, with advice from Hasstedt and the department heads, should revamp the core curriculum as soon as possible to guarantee that graduates are fully equipped to meet the challenges that they will face.

34. Bauernfeind, “Warrior Leaders,” 15.

35. Bauernfeind, “Warrior Leaders,” 16.

36. Shinn, “Superintendent.”

The newly appointed Academy Board of Visitors—a congressionally directed oversight committee that offers insight and guidance on issues such as culture, morale, and curriculum—met at USAFA in early August 2025. Members offered their own recommendations for changing the curriculum, including a request to add a required course in world history to the core. Yet, in the final analysis, Bauernfeind, assisted by Hasstedt and the department heads, will decide the structure of USAFA's curriculum for the future. To achieve the Academy's mission of providing the nation with competent military leadership, they will need to heed the advice from the board and ensure that the humanities play an increased role in the core. ✈️

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