

MILITARY

Developing Leaders of Character: A Conversation with USAFA Superintendent, Lt Gen Richard Clark

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In the little more than one year since Lieutenant General Richard M. Clark returned to the United States Air Force Academy to lead his alma mater, he has overseen one of the most challenging periods in the institution's history. In a recent conversation with Colonel Kurt Wendt, Director of the Center for Character & Leadership Development, USAFA's 21st Superintendent sat down to reflect on the past year, the unique challenges it presented, and the critical importance of character to the development of leaders for our Air Force and Space Force. "Developing leaders of character is our number one priority, and I love that mission," said Lt Gen Clark. "It makes this place very special because it goes beyond academics, athletics, or military training. Being a leader of character is something so big that regardless of what your aspirations are in life, developing at this Academy will help you get there."

The mission of developing leaders of character is the foundation that USAFA is built upon. All aspects of cadet development, from the academic curriculum, to athletics and military training are organized around that prime directive. Lt Gen Clark is the first USAFA Superintendent to have also served as Commandant of Cadets, and

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his influence on the Academy's character development efforts date back to that time. In 2011, he authored the foreword to a foundational document: "Developing Leaders of Character at the United States Air Force Academy: A Conceptual Framework."¹ It explained that the purpose of USAFA is "to develop leaders of character who our nation can count on: leaders equipped to respond to the complexity, uncertainty, and asymmetry of today's world because they possess a firm and stable character that reflects the virtues embodied in our Core Values." This purpose remains true today, as USAFA seeks to grow leaders of character, the future combat leaders who will lead our Nation's Air and Space Forces in a highly complex and uncertain environment.

The Leader of Character Framework is an evidence based framework that describes the approach to developing a leader of character. "The Framework enables us to put our Core Values into action," said Clark. "When we put integrity first, we are embodying what it means to live honorably. When we are committed to service before self, that enables us to lift others to be their best possible selves. And when we demonstrate excellence in all we do, we elevate performance both as individuals and across our entire Academy community." The framework provides a

deliberate, unifying structure to all efforts across the USAFA mission elements, helping all cadets, faculty, and staff to understand the approach and where they fit in. "We are all leaders at USAFA – Every coach, faculty member, airbase wing airman, we must all be leaders of character. Embracing the Framework is something that we should all be aspiring to, making it a part of our leadership every day," said Clark. "Living honorably, lifting others, and elevating performance are the components of the framework, and these are the things I want my kids to do. So, even as a parent, I want to demonstrate those qualities and those ideals to my kids. But also to the airmen that I come into contact every day, to the cadets that I see, and I think it's something that we should all be proud of and that we should all take as a, I think aspirational framework for us to embrace."

As Lt Gen Clark described, the Framework defines a leader of character as someone who:

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

"The Framework needs to permeate throughout the entirety of USAFA. The athletic department, the Cadet Wing, the Dean of Faculty – it's very clear how they can embrace it and weave it through everything

¹ <https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/21st-Century-LoC-Final-March-2021.pdf>
<https://caccapl.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/web/character-development-project/repository/developing-leaders-of-character-conceptual-framework.pdf>

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that they do,” said Clark. “But it can't stop there, we have to ask ourselves – how do we do our daily work? When we talk about dignity and respect, how does that relate to the Leader of Character Framework? If you're an honorable leader and you truly want to lift others, then you're going to live a life of dignity and respect, and you're going to embrace those qualities in every interaction that you have with people.”

With that in mind, the Center for Character & Leadership Development is uniquely positioned to enable and enact that mission. As USAFA's Center for all things related to character and leadership, it provides services and support to all faculty, staff, and cadets to assist with individual, team and organizational development. CCLD accomplishes this through research support, integration efforts, experiential learning activities, Senior Scholar inputs, developmental workshops, and the Journal of Character & Leadership Development (JCLD).

Part of carrying out that mandate, is examining what is working and constantly adjusting to make sure that we are the leaders of character that are being developed are prepared to be successful today and into the future. Along those lines, just as it has impacted campuses and communities across the United States and around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented USAFA with unprecedented challenges, and has forced the institution to think about how to adapt while still meeting mission requirements. While current cadets may be going through a different USAFA experience than past classes, ultimately this will become a unique aspect of their character and leadership development. “COVID-19 has been as much of a character and leadership development opportunity as anything that we could present to them artificially,” said Lt Gen Clark. “I am incredibly impressed and proud of how this institution has taken the incredible challenges

of the pandemic. The cadets have been amazingly resilient. They have endured significant hardships but have stepped up and pushed through. They have taken ownership of this challenge as leaders, and have lifted one another up. But they didn't do it alone. Our staff, faculty, and coaches have been and continue to be absolutely amazing.” It has been a whole of institution effort to adjust to current conditions while still providing critical developmental experiences.

One aspect where this has been most evident is with respect to resilience. In considering how developing character can reinforce leaders against the challenges they will face in their lives and careers, Lt Gen Clark likes to channel the old adage from the 6th century Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: “*Your thoughts become words, your words become actions, your actions become habits, your habits become character, your character is your destiny.*” “We have to work the Framework into our daily language, and our daily actions, and then it will become habits. That's how we develop character,” said Clark. “But it's also important that we communicate it the right way, and that all of our leaders understand and embrace it – from our cadet leaders to our staff and permanent party. We all have to own it.”

While the first year may not have turned out exactly as Gen Clark had predicted, when he reflected back on the year, he modeled the perfect developmental approach by saying “I'm proud to be a part of it and I'll continue to do whatever I can to help our school and execute our mission better. I'll keep getting out of bed every day, looking for a better way to do it.” In uncertain times, such a perspective is exactly what is exactly what is needed.

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