Appendix: Teaching at West Point

By

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Thayer Hall is a massive four-story building embedded in a cliff overlooking the west bank of the Hudson River and it is one of the largest academic buildings at West Point. Containing almost one hundred small classrooms, it is home to several academic departments including the one that I belonged to for seven years- the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. This department has two missions. It is responsible for developing and teaching several courses in West Point's core curriculum, which means that every cadet is guaranteed at least two semesters with instructors in the department. It is also responsible for teaching all of the courses for cadets who are management majors, leadership majors, psychology majors, sociology majors and engineering psychology majors (which, to be sure, is an odd collection of academic disciplines for one department). While I was in the department, in addition to being responsible for the management program for four years, I was the course director for the first course that management majors took (*Introduction to Management*) as well as their final, capstone management course (*Strategic Management*).

One day, three cadets from my strategy class were sitting in my office on the second floor of Thayer Hall. They had come to discuss their class assignment. The cadets were looking at me, perplexed and more than a little frustrated. All three of them were graduating firsties (as West Point calls seniors) and, after being at West Point for forty-five of their forty-seven months, they had learned to *get it done quickly, get it done right and move on to the next task*. They were now in their capstone strategic management class, two months from graduation and they were surprised at my reaction to their ideas.

The most important assignment in our strategy class consisted of two tasks. Earlier in the semester, cadets had organized into small teams and each team picked a Fortune 500 company. They had to role-play that they were a team of strategic consultants hired by that company's board of directors. Their first task was to analyze their chosen firm and its competitive environment. The cadets in my office were now working on the second task of their class project. This task required them to develop a unique strategic recommendation for their firm. This particular team had come up with an extremely clever idea and they were very proud of it. In their minds, they had accomplished their academic mission by coming up with a great idea- catching strategic lightning in a bottle, so to speak.

I was dissatisfied with their achievement and my reaction caught them by surprise because they did not yet realize that we were operating on two different levels. The cadets were focused on *results* and, in their minds, a good idea generated at random was still a good idea. I was focused on the *process* they were supposed to use to generate results. A focus on process is important because it is designed to discipline, enrich and guide their strategic thinking. I was waiting for them to talk to me about all the alternative strategies they had developed and the criteria they had used to come up with their final choice. I wanted them to demonstrate their mastery of the building blocks of strategy. The cadets still didn't realize that the purpose of the assignment was to demonstrate the ability to think in a strategic manner. As a result, it took awhile to explain to them that my idea of mission accomplishment was different than theirs. Bernard Brodie once said that *soldiers are rarely scholars and civilians are rarely students of strategy* and his observation makes it is easy to see why teaching strategy at West Point is such a challenging task.

West Point was the crucible that shaped my approach to thinking about strategy. I was the course director who developed and taught the strategy course for seven years to cadets who were management majors. This responsibility required me to spend a great deal of time reflecting on a core question- how do courses that were designed for business schools fit into the educational philosophy of a school for soldiers? In my strategic management course, we spent our days talking about Walmart and Pixar and Starbucks. How did these discussions fit into the education of a future Army officer? How were concepts and cases from the corporate world relevant to military professionals? The more that I thought about this challenge, the clearer became the linkages between military strategy and corporate strategy. As we will see, these two fields of thought are complementary but, oddly enough, scholars in both fields rarely talk to each other. Given my position, I was forced to spend a lot of time thinking about the linkages and the result is these essays.

These essays combine a military perspective on strategy and leadership with a corporate perspective. In my case, blending these two worlds is hardly surprising. During the military portion of my career, I was a graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College, trained as an Army strategist, worked with four-star generals and had strategic articles published in Army professional journals. During the civilian portion of my career, I had several years of corporate experience, worked with CEOs, obtained a Ph.D in strategic management and taught strategy to MBA students in three different universities. As it turned out, this combination was well suited for West Point.

The basis for writing these essays is the observation that effective strategic leadership is both valuable and rare. Surprisingly enough, many organizational leaders fail to demonstrate the ability to think and lead at a strategic level. As Peter Senge once noted, "*Few large corporations live even half as long as a person*." Such abbreviated lifespans are

frequently due to the fact that those in charge of organizations have a limited understanding of leadership and strategy. My West Point experience led me to believe that any leader can profit from considering strategy and leadership from both a military and corporate perspective.

The purpose of these essays is to point the way to more robust models of strategy and leadership. A consideration of the military world *and* the corporate world leads to an integrated model that enriches our understanding of strategy and leadership. I am not saying that either perspective is better than the other. I am saying that these perspectives are two sides of the same coin. The military perspective of strategy and leadership is supported by thousands of years of examples and it answers questions differently than the way that they are answered in an MBA classroom. So let me begin at West Point where this idea had its genesis. During the years that I taught there, it gradually became clear to me that my thinking was being decisively shaped by two very different sets of internal expectations.

The force of history formed my first set of expectations. Anyone who visits West Point is immediately immersed in history- to a degree that is unusual in the United States. After all, our country is a young country but at West Point, a sense of history is thickly palpable. One of my favorite examples of the prevalence of history at West Point can be found at an entranceway to the old cadet library. Two nondescript cannon barrels are bolted to the granite walls on either side of a Gothic entranceway. This martial display, by itself, is nothing special. West Point is littered with old cannon barrels. But the two cannon barrels at the library have small plaques mounted underneath them which clarifies why they are special. One of the cannon barrels fired the first shot of the Civil War and the other cannon (*of course*) fired the last shot. Actually, what I found most interesting about this example is that most visitors to West Point walk past these cannon barrels without a second glance, completely oblivious to this tangible example of American history. That is because the evidence of history is so commonplace at West Point.

What made history relevant to my personal experience is that wherever you go on West Point, you see evidence of the achievements of its graduates. The History Department at West Point has a proud motto- "*Much of the history we teach was made by the people we taught*" and a walk around West Point demonstrates the relevance of this statement. The evidence is everywhere- the oil paintings of famous graduates in Grant Hall, the bronze plaques in the hallways of academic buildings that commemorate memorable graduates, the statues in the central post area. It is clear that centuries of West Point graduates have made a powerful contribution to the building of America as they became presidents, victorious generals, famous engineers and prominent corporate leaders.

To be immersed in such an atmosphere is both humbling and motivational and you encounter the effects of this atmosphere in the most unlikely places. For me, the force of history was always to be found in my Thayer Hall classrooms. At the beginning of every semester, the same thought occurred to me when I walked into a classroom and met a group of cadets for the first time - *I wonder which of these cadets will be the next Ulysses Grant or Dwight Eisenhower?* Once that thought pops into your head, you have created a powerful set of expectations for yourself. These expectations set a very high bar that shapes your everyday performance.

The second set of expectations that influenced my behavior while at West Point was shaped by a force that was less visible but more powerful than the history of the place. I was always impressed by the level of achievement of those who attended West Point. These were young people from all fifty states who had excelled in academics, athletics, leadership and community service. It was clear that they had the potential to succeed anywhere. What they all had in common was their willingness to give at least nine years of their lives to serve their country (four years at West Point followed by a minimum of five years active duty). In addition, during the entire time that I was teaching there, every single cadet knew that they were headed for combat as soon as they graduated. By choosing to attend West Point, these young people had demonstrated a formidable level of commitment to their country. The second question that occurred to me when I met cadets for the first time was a simple one- *what can I do to match their level of commitment*? The answer to that question influenced my thinking and my behavior every day while teaching at West Point.

What do I mean by matching the level of commitment demonstrated by cadets? One example would be the strategy exercise that I mentioned earlier, which was the most important graded event in my strategy course. As I mentioned, cadet teams had to analyze their chosen company (in order to identify organizational strengths and weaknesses) and they are to analyze the firm's operating environment (in order to identify external opportunities and threats). Based on their analysis, each cadet team has to come up with an original, relevant and feasible strategic recommendation for their chosen firm.

If you are intrigued by this class requirement, I should point out that this project is astonishingly labor intensive- for the instructor. When I taught four different sections of the strategy course during a semester, the parameters of this graded exercise meant that I was supervising sixteen different teams (sixteen cadets in every section = an average of four teams per section). More to the point- each of these teams would be analyzing a different Fortune 500 company. In order to provide every cadet team with guidance, feedback and grades, I needed to be familiar with each of their companies- past history, current challenges, future strategy and financials. This effort was one of the more labor-intensive aspects of the course.

Creating a strategy project, however onerous for the instructor, was not especially noteworthy so I also created two levels of competition for this assignment. Obviously, this was a graded exercise for every cadet in my course but this particular graded exercise came with a twist. The two teams that achieved the highest final grades would then compete head to head during the last week of the semester in a strategy case competition before a panel of judges that I invited to the competition. Judges included Fortune 500 CEOs and deans of top-ranked business schools. Cadets always responded well to the opportunity to excel in competitive circumstances.

During their four years at West Point, cadets are constantly tested in a variety of arenas- in the classroom, on the athletic field and as military leaders. They are required to do reasonably well in all three areas. Cadets are not rewarded for excelling in one area if they did so by neglecting their other responsibilities. For a cadet, academic success will never serve as a substitute for failing to carry out their military responsibilities. Similarly, excellence in academics will never substitute for an inability to run two miles in fifteen minutes. The ability to demonstrate excellence in all three of these dimensions is a core component of the West Point experience. As one of my cadets put it, every cadet needs to show they have a "warrior heart" and that they must be capable of dealing with the stress of the West Point experience with both competence and resilience.

One of the implications of this approach to cadet development is that cadets are constantly involved in a broad range of activities. I once had Kevin Plank, the founder and CEO of UnderArmour, come and talk to the cadets in my strategy class. During his visit, I took him to the cadet mess hall for lunch. It is always an impressive sight to see the entire corps of cadets sit down at the same moment, get through lunch and finish within thirty minutes. The cadets sit at tables designed for ten people so when I took Kevin Plank, we had a table that consisted of the two of us as well as eight cadets who were all management majors. Given his interest in the world of athletics, I had invited cadets from a wide range of teams. There were cadets who were football players, soccer players, baseball players, hockey players, volleyball players, rugby players- and they were all from my strategy class. I once went to an Army baseball game being played on Doubleday Field and what made this game especially memorable (for me, anyway) was the fact that the pitcher, catcher and shortstop were all students of mine.

In addition to sports, it was possible to see cadets excel in many other activities. One of the most memorable to me was an annual event at West Point- the Hudson Valley Special Olympics. Every year in April, West Point would host this event and, given its scale, it was something to see. Hundreds of special athletes would compete in a variety of athletic events and almost all of them were accompanied by family or caregivers. An event with

thousands of attendees always required a lot of planning and a lot of cadet participation. Cadets in the management honor society traditionally had the responsibility for planning and running this event. The cadets spent a semester considering every aspect of the event (sponsors, traffic control, scheduling of each competition) and they also had to figure out how to use seven or eight hundred cadet volunteers on the day of the event.

One afternoon, I was down on the athletic fields with a team of cadet volunteers as they practiced the opening ceremonies of the upcoming Special Olympics. One of the cadets was having trouble matching up their recording of the National Anthem with the sound system at the stadium. Suddenly, another cadet piped up- "Don't worry, I can sing the National Anthem for you." We immediately demanded an audition. As she grabbed the microphone and began to sing, every single person within earshot was absolutely captivated. It wasn't quite Whitney Houston at the Super Bowl but it was close enough that her rendition has remained locked in our memories. That is what it was like interacting with cadets every day.

I always enjoyed listening to cadets tell something interesting about themselves. For one thing, cadets rarely realize that they have far more social leverage and access while at West Point than they will ever have as officers. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff usually doesn't have time to sit down with a group of Army colonels visiting from the War College but he will eagerly clear his schedule to sit down with cadets who are visiting the Pentagon. I was once chatting with a cadet before class and I asked if he had had an interesting weekend. As it happens, he was on the Army baseball team and that weekend they had played the New York Yankees on Doubleday Field (*Derek Jeter sat in our dugout!).* During their forty-seven months at West Point, cadets are always busy and many of their activities were interesting beyond belief.

I taught at West Point for twelve years in two different departments and I loved every day of it. If you love teaching, then West Point, in many respects, is Utopia. One of the reasons I wrote these essays is because I was fortunate enough to work at a world-class educational institution that truly values good teaching. Many schools say that they prioritize teaching and that they value good teachers but we know that most universities don't make decisions about tenure based on teaching excellence. West Point takes the task of teaching very seriously and does more than pay lip service to this goal.

People who study organizational culture say that it is possible to identify the values of an organization by listening to the stories they tell or by looking at the artifacts they create. When I was a member of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, there was a cultural artifact prominently displayed in the department's main hallway. It was a simple rectangle of laminated poster board probably 2' by 3' in size. The names of all of the

instructors in the department were listed on the left hand side of the poster and to the right of every name was a row of boxes that were empty at the beginning of every semester. Whenever one of us sat in on a colleague's class during the semester, we wrote our name and the date of our visit in one of the boxes on this posterboard. Over the course of the semester, the empty boxes would fill with names and dates. By the end of every semester, almost all of the boxes would be filled in.

When I was responsible for the management program at West Point, I would visit the classes of each of my management colleagues at least once a semester and if they were new instructors, I would visit their classes more often than that. The point of this exercise was to demonstrate in very clear terms that all of us valued good teaching and that watching a colleague teach a class was always time well spent. If any university says that it values good teaching, there is a simple test for this assertion. Do the Dean and the department heads spend a significant amount of time in classrooms watching their colleagues teach and do they also take the time to sit with the instructor and provide constructive feedback on what they have seen?

At West Point, the majority of instructors are mid-career Army officers and they were expected to be great teachers. I always told new instructors that the average person only remembers four or five of their college professors later in life. I would then ask them to reflect on what they needed to do in order to be one of those unforgettable teachers. In pursuit of this goal, instructors frequently found that the nature and the prestige of West Point were resources that they could ruthlessly exploit to improve their classes and make them more interesting. Because I taught strategic management, CEOs were my targets of opportunity and I was surprisingly successful at getting some of the best-known CEOs in America to come and talk to the cadets in my class. One example- Howard Schultz of Starbucks.

In the fall of 2014, Maureen Dowd wrote an op-ed piece in the *Sunday New York Times* in which she chronicled the development of Howard Schultz's interest in military veterans. She traces the origin of his interest to a visit that Schultz made to West Point. The genesis of his visit was my strategy class. One semester, I assigned a Starbucks business case and during our class discussion, several of the cadets observed that Schultz seemed to be a remarkable leader and they would be interested to hear what he had to say about leadership. I talked to my department head after class and requested that West Point invite Schultz for a visit. Two semesters later, he was in our department conference room talking to cadets about leadership. The point of this anecdote has nothing to do with me or even my department- the point is that wonderful opportunities are common in West Point classrooms. The Department of English gets world-famous authors to talk to cadets; the

Department of Social Sciences gets world-famous politicians and statesmen to talk to cadets. And being able to teach in this set of circumstances is a lot of fun.

Military historians have pointed out that the original rationale for West Point as a "school for soldiers" was revolutionary in nature. The idea that a young person could become an officer by means of their educational achievements rather than by favoritism, money or circumstances of birth was truly transformational. It contradicted a thousand years of European military experience. West Point was one of the first attempts by a Western nation to provide an avenue to the profession of arms by means of education. It was an inherently democratic approach to the task of establishing an Army and it proved to be highly successful. Since it was founded in 1802, the prestige of West Point and the achievements of West Point graduates have spread throughout the world.

The goal of West Point is to ensure that every graduate leaves after forty-seven months as a "commissioned leader of character." The West Point mission statement specifies that those who work at the Military Academy employ three different activities in their pursuit of this goal; we <u>educate</u> cadets, we <u>train</u> cadets and we <u>inspire</u> them as they go through this process. Notice that of all of the means at our disposal, the first one mentioned in the mission statement is *educating*.

The rigor of the education process is noticeable throughout the Military Academy. A walk through the academic buildings during the school year demonstrates how seriously West Point takes the task of educating cadets. Classrooms during a normal academic day have several interesting characteristics. The first is that most of the people teaching classes are highly successful young Army officers. They are selected directly from troop unit assignments, sent to graduate school and then go to West Point to teach for three years. These teaching positions are a source of fierce competition among Army officers and the quality of those selected makes it clear that this program represents an enormous investment by the Army.

Think about the implications of this program. When I was the director of the management program, most of my instructors were Army officers who had successfully commanded in combat and then had gotten their MBA at Harvard, Chicago or Wharton. As soon as they finished graduate school, they came to West Point for a three-year assignment. This meant that one-third of my instructors were leaving every year and their replacements had probably never taught a college course in their lives. We spent every summer with new instructors initiating them into the mysteries of life behind the podium. We discussed instructional design, classroom techniques and evaluation philosophies. We made the new instructors practice-teach their classes in front of other faculty members and then immediately gave them detailed feedback on their performance. We had them sit in class in

the role of students while we taught a class and then asked for their feedback. As you can see, there is a heavy emphasis on effective teaching.

These officers would bring a passion, an enthusiasm and a sense of Army professionalism to their West Point assignment that enables many of them to become memorable teachers. This interaction between cadets and their instructors has been a defining characteristic of the West Point experience for more than two hundred years. History tells us that the Civil War began in April, 1861 with the artillery bombardment of Fort Sumter. General Pierre Beauregard was the commander of Confederate forces that fired on the fort. The commander of the besieged Union forces inside Fort Sumter was Major Robert Anderson. The irony is that Anderson had been one of Beauregard's instructors when young Beauregard was a cadet at West Point.

Instructors at West Point are not valued simply for the sake of tradition or for their ability to impart knowledge. One of the most effective ways of developing leaders is to provide them with great role models and mentors. Members of the faculty are expected to serve as leadership role models who work with cadets on a daily basis and they are expected to be life-long mentors. This might be considered a very generic statement but when put into practice, it makes West Point a unique academic institution.

One of the core courses taken by all cadets during their freshman (or *plebe*) year is a course in general psychology, which is taught by instructors from my department. During this course, cadets would take mid-term and final exams. One year, the number of cadets who failed the mid-term exam was significantly higher than the failure rate from the previous semester. As a result, the night before the next exam, all of the instructors who were teaching this course went on a walkabout. They visited the cadet barracks to see their students and evaluate their study conditions. They went to the cadet library to talk to cadet study groups. They evaluated conditions in the cadet barracks to ensure that they were conducive to studying and to see if the plebes were being given the time they needed to prepare for a major academic requirement like a mid-term exam.

The instructors went on this campus tour for two very different reasons. First of all, Army officers are inclined to be very mission-oriented. In this case, their mission was to ensure that young cadets understood concepts of general psychology well enough that they could apply them in their future role as leaders. A challenge to this mission (such as an unexpectedly large number of plebes failing the mid-term exam) would naturally be met with a course of action designed to improve the chances of mission success.

In a larger sense, the instructors were doing what they did because they understood that they are supposed to serve the cadets as role models of military professionalism. In fact,

cadets are asked to evaluate all of their instructors at the end of every semester and one of the questions is- "*Did your instructor demonstrate the attributes of a military professional?*" As a result, the impromptu evening visit to the barracks had very much of a proactive feel to it. If the conditions in a particular cadet barracks were not conducive to studying, the instructors didn't just note them, they took action by alerting the cadet chain of command in order for them to take immediate corrective action.

In addition to the nature of the faculty, another noticeable element of interest throughout the academic buildings is the nature of the classrooms. Visitors often comment on the small size of many West Point classrooms. Cadets are rarely taught in large groups. I taught at West Point for twelve years in two different departments. I taught in the Department of Social Sciences for five years as an Army officer (1989-1994) and I taught in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership for seven years as a civilian professor (2007-2014). During those twenty-four semesters, I taught 1,209 cadets in 78 different sections. The point I am making with these statistics is to show that, over the course of more than a decade of teaching, my average class size consisted of sixteen cadets.

This student-teacher ratio puts a great deal of responsibility on both students and teachers. One of the reasons for teaching small sections is that cadets are expected to show that they are actively responsible for their learning by being prepared for class. I normally assumed that cadets had read (or at least had asked a classmate about) the assignment for the day in order to prepare for class. I further assumed that they would use their preparation to constructively participate in class. This, of course, is the ideal and cadets are like college students anywhere. They frequently have personal priorities that conflict with their academic priorities. That is why one of my responsibilities was to structure the course so that it caught the interest of cadets and, thus, motivated them to spend time on the course. It was also my responsibility to structure the course so that intelligent participation in classroom discussions was recognized and rewarded as part of their overall grade.

Consider the following- when I would teach a strategy class to sixty undergraduates at a civilian university, I was teaching all sixty of them in the same room at the same time. This means that I will spend forty hours of classroom time with these sixty students during the semester. If, for example, I wanted each student to give a ten-minute presentation sometime during the semester, that will take, at an absolute minimum, six hundred minutes of classroom time. This equates to twenty-five percent of the classroom time available during the semester, which is clearly unrealistic.

Teaching sixty cadets at West Point during a semester presents a completely different picture. I am teaching them sixteen at a time. This requires me to be in the classroom for forty hours for each small group of cadets. With this small group model of teaching,

requiring each cadet to give a ten-minute presentation will only take up five or six percent of our total classroom time. The difference is stark for the instructor. It only takes forty hours of my time to teach a semester of strategy to sixty students at a civilian university while it takes one hundred and sixty hours of my time to teach sixty cadets at West Point. It is not possible to overestimate the value of teaching students in small groups.

The topic of education – what to teach cadets and how to teach it to them- has been a hotly debated topic since West Point was founded as an educational institution more than two hundred years ago. The constantly changing nature of the global political system and the constantly changing nature of global conflict have, over time, sparked fierce debates over the most appropriate education system at West Point. When Douglas MacArthur was the Superintendent of West Point in the aftermath of World War I, he faced strong opposition from the Academic Board as he tried to reform the curriculum. In the aftermath of World War II, General Eisenhower provided the Superintendent of West Point with observations that he had made during combat operations in Europe about small-unit leadership in the U.S. Army. Eisenhower's observations led to changes in the basic academic structure at West Point and culminated in the creation of my department- Behavioral Sciences and Leadership.

One aspect of ongoing debates about the nature of cadet education is related to the difference between training and education. It is relatively easy to identify what type of military training is relevant for young Army officers. They need to know, for example, the characteristics of different weapons systems. They should be familiar with land navigation, military administration and logistics. But what is the most appropriate *education* for prospective officers? Should cadets have a robust core curriculum or should they be allowed to specialize by choosing academic majors? For most of its history, cadets at West Point were not given any choice about their education. All cadets took the same engineering-oriented curriculum. West Point existed for more than one hundred and fifty years before cadets were allowed to pick their own academic majors. Even today, the heritage of a robust core curriculum is very much in evidence.

Even an agreement on the merits of a strong core curriculum doesn't settle ongoing debates. If West Point employs a core curriculum, should it emphasize math, science and engineering or the humanities and social sciences? Should academic courses be chosen because of their general intellectual value or should they be specifically linked to a cadet's future military responsibilities? A well-worn adage states that the 19th century was the century of chemistry, the 20th century was the century of physics and the 21st century is the century of biology. Currently, all cadets take required courses in chemistry and physics. Should one of these courses be dropped and biology added to the curriculum in its place?

The passionate debate engendered by these types of questions throughout West Point's history reflects the importance of education for the military profession.

The current core curriculum comprises seventy-five percent of the courses that every cadet takes during their four years at West Point. I knew that cadets coming into my management classes had already gone through math, economics, political science, history, physics and foreign language classes (just to name a few). The nature of the core curriculum adds to the academic rigor of West Point and it greatly contributes to the challenging nature of the West Point experience.

These essays were shaped by my experience of teaching a strategy course at West Point. In my particular case, when teaching strategic management to cadets, the first question that I had to answer was- why teach strategic thinking to undergraduates? After all, they will not be making strategic decisions until they are much further down their leader development path. The best answer to this question came to me when I was in a small group discussion with the CEO of one of the world's best-known consulting firms. He began his remarks by saying that the question he is asked most frequently by Fortune 500 CEOs is- *how can I build leaders faster?* In the corporate world, leaders of organizations are faced with a fundamental mismatch. They can build stores, refineries or factories in a year or two but it takes much longer to "build" leaders who are capable of running those stores, refineries or factories. Strategic leaders frequently point out that you can't begin to accumulate the intellectual capital that you need as a strategic leader on your first day as a CEO. Once you are a strategic leader, the pace of activity is so relentless that you only have time to draw on whatever wisdom you have already accumulated. The process of developing oneself as a strategic leader needs to begin early and with cadets, it begins the day that they set foot on West Point.