

Military Academies: A National Treasure

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By Vice Admiral Jeffrey L. Fowler, U.S. Navy, Superintendent, U.S. Naval Academy

Developing our nation's future military officers is an important national priority. Professional military officers, and the training and education systems that prepare these leaders, significantly contribute to the armed forces' ability to promote peace and prevail in war.

A May 21st opinion piece in the New York Times, *The Academies' March Toward Mediocrity*, casts doubt on the effectiveness of our military academies in producing the qualified leaders needed to serve in our armed services. The author of the op-ed specifically states that "mediocrity is the norm" at our academies. I strongly disagree with the author's assertions and conclusions.

My perspective on the value of our military academies emerges from 32 years of naval service to include five command tours of duty, operating with our nation's other military branches and allied nations, and encountering the full spectrum of military operations. I have observed countless military academy graduates over my career and can say without the slightest hesitation that these graduates make significant contributions to the well-being of our forces and demonstrate their value to our national defense on a daily basis. As the superintendent of the Naval Academy for the past three years, I have been honored to guide the development process of thousands of midshipmen and can state with confidence that we provide the Navy and Marine Corps with superb young officers who prove their mettle every day in the mountains and villages of Afghanistan, and on, above and below the world's sea lanes.

The op-ed author seems to base his opposition to the academies on three tenets. The first is academy graduates cost more than Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) graduates and this additional cost is not providing the taxpayer with a superior product. The second is that a focus on intercollegiate athletics has had a detrimental impact on the academies' "pursuit of excellence." And the third is that there is "an unofficial affirmative-action preference in [academy] admissions." I will address each of these arguments in turn.

The military academies are of course not the sole source of our nation's officers. For more than a half-century, our officer commissioning sources have included academies, university ROTC programs and officer candidate schools (OCS). Periodic discussions that frame the commissioning source debate as simply a one-or-the-other option dismiss the fact that our military benefits from the distinctive qualities offered by each commissioning source. The military academies have the unique role of providing officers who are immersed in the traditions and values of their respective services and motivated to share and sustain those traditions and values throughout our armed forces. Those who enter the military via ROTC or OCS bring their own unique perspectives and experiences, but have not had the same intense exposure to the daily routine of military life.

The cost associated with educating a Naval Academy midshipman is also far less than stated in the May 21st op-ed. When a midshipman fails to complete the academy program and is charged for their four-year education, that bill comes to \$170,000, a figure established by the Department of the Navy. The costs associated with educating an academy student are in fact comparable to or less than the total realized costs of educating an ROTC student at select private or other state-funded universities. At the Naval Academy we take seriously our obligation to the American taxpayers to achieve the maximum return on their investment.

Service academies, as compared to other commissioning sources, also have the ability to quickly adapt academic, leadership and professional curricula to emerging threats and changing world conditions. Simply stated, Naval Academy programs reflect the needs of the customer – the active duty Navy and Marine Corps. Since we control what is taught in academic and professional courses, the Naval Academy has, for example, over the past three years been able to quickly increase foreign language and cultural exposure, initiate cyber warfare studies, adjust engineering and science courses, and tailor ethical decision making case studies to the reality of today's warfare - all to better prepare our graduates to serve in an increasingly interdependent and dynamic world.

In response to the op-ed author's concern about athletic excellence, I must stress that the academies graduate physically fit leaders, not merely scholars. All academy students are student-athletes who strive for physical development via daily fitness routines and either mandatory intramurals, club sports or varsity athletics. While it may be popular to diminish the value of athletic competition at the intercollegiate level, the military academies represent some of the best examples of student-athletes who compete at the highest levels. This commitment to excellence on the field complements the classroom, where the Naval Academy continually ranks number one or two in the nation for student-athlete graduation rates.

Our commitment to athletics also contributes to our midshipmen learning about teamwork, esprit de corps and overcoming adversity. Naval Academy student-athlete graduates are serving faithfully at all levels of the Navy and Marine Corps, from the most junior officers to 4-star admirals, including two former Naval Academy varsity athletes who between them lead U.S. military operations spanning two-thirds of the globe.

Finally, I will address our admissions process. The service academies are national institutions due to our mission to produce leaders for our nation and because our student bodies are comprised of the talent from every corner of America. We search diligently in every congressional district for candidates who are well-rounded morally, mentally and physically, and offer the experience and perspectives that enrich the life of the academy and our military. The backgrounds of these potential candidates cross all racial, gender, ethnic, socio-economic, religious and geographic lines.

I must emphasize that we admit only highly motivated, well-rounded individuals based upon their combined excellence in academics, athletics, leadership potential and community service. Applicants compete in a single, fair, structured and highly selective process. Simply stated, the Naval Academy's admissions processes are in accordance with applicable federal laws and based on an individual's performance and potential for future success as a naval officer.

Not surprisingly, the competition to receive appointments to the academies is intense. Every academy has encountered an increase in the numbers of applicants over the last few years. This increase in applicants goes far beyond economic reasons and reflects the fact that young Americans want to tackle the challenge of an academy, gain useful real-world leadership experiences and be part of something bigger than themselves. Witnessing the commitment to service prevalent across the nation, this generation is running toward the fire, not away from it.

We believe the Naval Academy's reputation for excellence – both past and present – is enduring. We seek young men and women who will be able to balance a demanding academic, physical and leadership development curriculum. As a result, the military academies have been and continue to be ranked among the nation's very top colleges. Many educators, guidance counselors, professional associations and the media recognize the academies for their challenging, progressive and effectual educational programs.

Important indicators at the Naval Academy point to a program that demonstrates excellence, not "mediocrity." A 10-year analysis of semester GPA's shows an upward trend in spite of an increasingly demanding curriculum and an unwavering commitment to maintain the highest of standards in the classroom. During this same timeframe, we note similar progress in our cumulative multiple that measures a student's combined academic, physical and military performance.

The number of midshipmen achieving recognition on the academy's very competitive merit lists has increased, including a doubling of the minority students achieving this distinction over the past 10 years. Nearly 84% of the Naval Academy Class of 2010, all completing a demanding technical course load, will graduate in four years. This achievement very favorably compares to the national average that approaches 30% and 55% for the four- and six-year graduation rates, respectively.

The ultimate measure of the academies' value, however, is the performance of our graduates. Across the board, the feedback we receive is that recent academy graduates are performing superbly, and our Navy and Marine Corps are well served by these leaders. The senior enlisted and officer leaders of our Navy and Marine Corps are telling us that when our graduates report to their units, these young men and women are ready. And those units and our graduates in recent months have been called upon to provide disaster assistance in Haiti, conduct anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa and engage in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is no room for mediocrity in these operational theaters and our graduates are proving they are up for the challenge.

A recent decision by the Navy SEALs, arguably one of the most selective and demanding training programs in our military, again points to the quality of Naval Academy graduates. To head off undesirable attrition rates in training, the SEALs increased the dispersal of Naval Academy graduates undergoing SEAL training with officers from other commissioning sources. The Naval Academy graduates' high performance and example of teamwork and drive helped to influence their peers and achieve a noticeable decrease in overall attrition within the SEAL training pipeline.

We receive additional feedback from our congressionally mandated board of visitors—comprised of elected officials, business executives and educators who are appointed by either Congress or the President. These very experienced and accomplished leaders continue to applaud the academies' accomplishments, contributions and direction.

Lastly, the military academies continue to do more than simply graduate officers. As “leadership laboratories” for our students, the mission of the military academies has and continues to include an obligation to graduate leaders to serve the nation. Academy graduates have and will continue to contribute to the military and nation in many ways. Whether our graduates serve a career in the military, or assume positions in government, business and education, academy graduates are highly sought out for their leadership skills and propensity to succeed.

The one point upon which I do agree with the op-ed author is that the academies must always remain vigilant to maintain the level of excellence demanded by our citizens and continually assess and monitor our progress. I believe we are maintaining the highest standards, preparing our young men and women for the complex and volatile world they will face and graduating extraordinary leaders to serve our Navy, Marine Corps and nation. As we march forward, we march only in one direction and that is the direction of selfless service and professional excellence.