

USAFA AOG Chapter Presidents Conference, 2018

To: The Officers and Board of the Baltimore Chapter of the USAFA AOG (BCAOG)

From: Julie J.C.H. Ryan, September 20, 2018

Subj: Report on the activities and information shared at the 2018 annual AOG Chapter Presidents Conference, August 29 - 31.

Background:

The USAFA AOG holds an annual conference for Chapter Presidents in order to provide information on what is going on with the Academy and the alumni base, foster the exchange of information between chapters, and get feedback on how things are going out in the hinterlands. Despite its name, the conference is not required attendance for the Chapter President specifically: a representative is permitted to attend in place of the Chapter President. Attendance at the conference by one or more representatives of a chapter is one of the required elements for the award of Distinguished Chapter, an honor that the BCAOG has held since 2014. This report fulfills part of that requirement.

Attendees:

The conference was hosted by the USAFA AOG and, as such, was attended by many representatives of the AOG leadership and staff. These included Cathy McClain, '82, Chair of the AOG Board of Directors; Marty Marcolongo, '88, AOG President and CEO; Bill Preston, Parent Programs Coordinator; and Karina Ross, Director of Constituent Relations. Mike Gould, '76, President and CEO of the USAFA Endowment, attended some of the sessions as well.

The Chapter representatives in attendance were the following:

- Jim Barr, '72, Southern Arizona (representing Greg Montijo, '81)
- Jim Bennett, '89, Boise, Idaho
- Ed Bishop, '72, Heartland LeMay
- Barb Brennan, '84, Granite State
- Kirk Brown, Silver Falcons Affinity Group
- Al Dunlap, '73, Abilene, Texas
- Alex Granados, '04, Washington, DC
- Tim Jacobs, '83, Sacramento, California
- Rick Knoll, '65, Twin Cities
- Brian Maddocks, '91, Central Texas
- Jim Marshall, '75, Alamo
- Kirk McDonald, '90, St. Louis
- Gale Monahan, '05, Denver

- Bill Riley, '66, Rampart Chapter
- Michael Rose, '69, Charleston
- Pat Russell, '68, Las Vegas
- Julie Ryan, '82, Baltimore
- Gregory Shuey, '68, Kansas City
- Jason VanOverbeke, '03, Twin Cities
- James Wertz, '86, Blue Chile
- Joyce Washington, '85, SW Ohio Chapter
- Glen Wilson, '62, Northwest Arkansas
- Rick Wright, '74, North Texas
- Patrick Yanke, '93, AFA Society of North Carolina

Content Overview:

There was an enormous amount of information exchanged during this three-day conference, so the following notes will simply provide an overview. While the Chapter Presidents Conference was underway, the annual gathering of the Parents' Clubs was also being held. Since one of the goals of the AOG is to encourage more interaction between the alumni and the parents, some of the sessions were jointly attended. Most of the meetings were held in Doolittle Hall on the Academy grounds.

Day 1 was focused on what the AOG and the Endowment are doing, culminating with a reception hosted by the Superintendent at the Carleton House. This reception enabled the conference attendees to meet and socialize with the Parents' Clubs attendees. Day 2 began with briefings from the senior USAFA leadership to both the conference attendees and the Parents' Clubs. After lunch, the two groups split up and the conference continued with presentations from the AOG staff on various activities. The day concluded with the Distinguished Chapter banquet at the Eisenhower Golf Club. The final day was focused on the active exchange of information between the chapters on best practices, challenges, and opportunities.

Detailed Notes:

The following notes represent a summary of my written notes from the conference as well as my thoughts and reactions. Please note that these notes are highly subjective and subject to memory recall issues. Where additional supporting information is available, I have annotated that material in the content.

AOG and Endowment

The vision of the AOG is, first and foremost, to connect graduates. This includes not only connecting the people who have actually graduated with each other but also connecting graduates with people who have not yet graduated and people who are invested in the success of the graduate community, such as parents and family members. As such, there are many

initiatives underway, such as the Class Legacy project. Most of you know that the Class Legacy Project teams a class that graduated 50 years earlier with a new incoming class. The purpose of this project is to foster shared values and establish mentorship between the generations. You can read more about the Class Legacy Events at this website: <https://www.usafa.org/Events/Legacy>.

The latest addition to the program is what is being called the “Forged in Blue” program. As noted on the <https://www.usafa.org/Heritage/ClassRings> webpage, the class of 1968 provided financial support to the AOG to create a class ring display and collect 2 rings from each class. One of the rings is used for the display while the other serves as an “ingot”: it is melted down and mixed in with the material to be used for all new class’s rings. There is a very nice write up with both photos and a video at the following website: <https://www.usafawebguy.com/Blog/Entry/2284>.

One of the more moving projects that has been funded and supported by graduates is the Heritage Bridge and Trail. The class of ’59 spearheaded this program and still supports it, taking the newest cadets over the bridge in a ceremony of reflection and introspection. The inscription on the bridge reads thusly:

TO EACH INCOMING CADET:

The path to which you aspire has been consecrated by the blood of heroes and paved with the selfless service of countless men and women like you.

If you would be worthy of this heritage:

- * Make Integrity the bedrock value of your life.
- * Let your actions always be guided by an unshakable sense of duty, self-discipline, and personal responsibility.
- * Become a lifelong student of history, war, humanity, and leadership.
- * Be prepared to sacrifice everything to defend the principles upon which our nation was founded.
- * Cross this bridge with the determination to live a life that will make all that went before proud of you.

An obvious purpose of the bridge-crossing ceremony is to emphasize the gravity of the profession and its concomitant responsibilities for the new cadets as they embark on their new lives. One of the interesting lessons learned was that the timing of the event is important. At first, the ceremony was held very early in the calendar of events. It turned out that this timing didn’t work well: many of the cadets didn’t even remember having crossed the bridge, much less the message. So the ceremony is later in BCT (this year was Aug 3) and includes a photo of each cadet with a member of the class of ’59. The less harried basics are provided a significant amount of time to explore the heritage trail at leisure, pondering the heritage they aspire to inherit. You can read more about the Heritage Trail at https://www.usafa.org/Heritage/Heritage_Trail.

The goals and activities of both the AOG and the Endowment are to enhance all graduates’ experiences with a focus on an informal motto: *Our service never ends*. Those of you who were

at the BCAOG 2018 Founders' Day Dinner will recognize a refrain from Joe Morgan's reminder that there is no expiration date on our oaths of office.

The Endowment is working towards this by managing the money side of the equation. It is astonishing as to how much the donations from the alumni and others contribute to the Academy functions. There is a constant refrain of questions along the lines of "but the Academy is funded by the US Government — why do you need more?" It is true that there is a funding line for the Academy, but just like your local high school depends on donations to improve and expand programs, so does the Academy. Check out what the endowment has funded recently at this link: <https://www.usafa.org/Endowment/Impact>.

A relatively recent goal of the Endowment is to be able to provide each graduate a life membership in the AOG upon graduation. This actually turned out to be a subject for much debate amongst the attendees to the conference. While many strongly supported the idea, others were reluctant, opining that if the membership was simply awarded, the new graduates would not have 'skin in the game'. As a mechanism for creating and maintaining community, however, it seems like a worthy goal. If you have opinions on this subject, you should weigh in on the debate by contacting one or more of the AOG or Endowment leadership.

A more pressing concern of the AOG and Endowment is the management of the current divide between the two organizations. Many of us remember the contentious days of yore when the decision was made to split the AOG from the Endowment and then the following efforts to reconcile the rift. While the vote to reconcile was overwhelmingly positive (86% of those who voted were in favor of the reconciliation), not enough people voted so a quorum was not reached.

The current By-Laws define 25% of all eligible voters as a quorum. Only 19% of eligible voters participated in that vote. There is some indication that some voters abstained from participating in the vote specifically to keep a quorum from being reached, which is an, uh, let's just say *interesting* way of participating in a group decision..... Obviously, this problem is going to only get bigger with time. You will recall that the 50,000th graduate was added to the Long Blue Line in 2018: a 25% quorum is only going to become even more unattainable over time. It also is contrary to best practices: most very large not-for-profits define a quorum as 10% or even 5%. So look to have that issue raised sometime in the future.

The coordinating and deconfliction challenges associated with the many independent organizations supporting the Academy are complex. Did you know that there are currently seven (7) non-profits supporting the Academy? Each one of these has a Board of Directors and a professional staff headed by a CEO. To deconflict and coordinate, the CEOs meet once per month. Luckily, they like and trust each other, so it is as smooth as it can be, given the circumstances. As you can imagine, there is a lot of overlap and a fairly large potential for unintentional cross-purpose activity.

Stay tuned to hear about a move to start addressing this issue through a proposal to merge the CEO function of the AOG and the Endowment. The concept of the single CEO is that there would be one executive that reports to both Boards of Directors. There would be a set of Board Committees that would integrate the members of the two Boards to develop and communicate strategic direction to the CEO. The single CEO would then serve as the executive directing the activities of the AOG staff and the Endowment staff. This proposal is seen as a first step towards reducing redundancy while improving synergy.

The important thing is: **vote**. See note on quorum above.

USAFA Operations

There is a new advertisement for the Academy that premiered along with football season. The theme of the ad is “prove it”. I note that there are some interesting messaging similarities with the new Captain Marvel movie. (In case you have not yet been pummeled with the information: the new Captain Marvel movie features the protagonist starting out life as a USAFA cadet.) If you have watched or are planning to watch Falcon Football, keep your eyes out for the new ad. On a slightly related note, the football games now have themes.

Moving on to infrastructure week. There are two huge projects amongst all other other efforts going on to maintain the now 60 year old buildings that comprise the Academy. The Chapel will be deconstructed and rebuilt completely over a four year period of time. This construction will begin “soon.” The other big project is the development of a new Visitors Center Complex. The Academy has agreed to lease 57 acres near the North Gate for the development of a multi-use facility to take some of the pressure off Colorado Springs. It turns out that in the intervening years, Colorado Springs has grown from being a sleepy little town to a business center in its own right and hotel space has become something of a challenge. As noted in the press release, “The entire project, covering 57 acres, will include hotels, office space, a theater, a parking lot, a gift shop, a food court, a museum and a tourist information center.” [<https://www.krdo.com/news/top-stories/air-force-academy-offers-first-look-at-design-for-new-welcome-center/727346169>]

Besides all the construction, there are a couple of new initiatives to make the visitor experience better. First, docents are being signed up for tour duty. The docents will operate on a strictly volunteer basis, will be vetted, and will provide a more structured and intimate tour of the grounds. There has been a lot of interest expressed by grads in the CoS area, so that program is moving forward at a spritely pace. Second, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) applications are being harnessed to enhance and expand the visitation experience. The redone planetarium will feature some of these, while others will be available from the comfort of your own couch. Filming will begin in October for the web-based tour, which will include 365 degree walking tours, parachuting, and the like. And speaking of the web, 97.7 KAFA is now available on the web: listen in at <https://www.usafa.org/KAFA>.

There are clear recruiting benefits for all these initiatives, with an effort to make information more widely available to a broader swath of the American public. An ancillary effort has been to harness data analysis to identify districts that never or rarely cough up candidates for consideration. The inflection point that is being sought is to identify districts that have had 3 or fewer qualified candidates in the last 3 years. Note that this covers a lot of questions: the lack of applications and/or the inability to qualify, at the very least. An interesting point that was shared is that there are districts where the congress members simply do not fully appoint: some appoint none at all, some appoint sporadically, and some appoint less than their quotas. Bluntly put, if you are a kid in a district where your congress person doesn't make any appointments, the possibility of you becoming a candidate is greatly reduced. The effort, therefore, not only includes increasing awareness of the Academy as an option but also increasing awareness of the appointment process in general.

Local Chapter Activities

Towards the end of the conference, time was allotted for each chapter to share ideas and success stories. What became obvious from this session was that every chapter is different: the people have different types of jobs, commutes, and spending patterns. Some have very active parents' clubs that are integrated into the Chapter activities; some do not. Some chapters have civic organizations, such as orchestras, that provide a venue for convocation. Some chapters actively fund raise, while at least one seems actively allergic to having a bank account. Some chapters have very wealthy members, while others seem to be more ordinary. The bottom line is that activities have to be aligned with the membership: their commutes, their job requirements, their kids' soccer schedules, their communities, and their finances.

Here are some of the thoughts that were shared:

- Golf tournaments don't seem to work well, except for one chapter. That chapter took an old combat boot, had it bronzed, and made it into a trophy. A tri-service golf tournament is held each year, with the winner getting the Boot.
- The North Texas Chapter has adopted and swears by the donation model for funding: donate \$50 and you get a name tag; donate \$100 and you get a shirt. Other chapters have had some success with this model, although not all of them have give aways. Of the ones which have adopted the donation versus membership model, many say that their level of financial support increased significantly with the donations.
- There is an option on Cvent that can be activated for events that enable registrants to purchase more of a thing (like a dinner) or make a donation. These can be anonymized.
- Shooting events appear to be wildly popular.
- One chapter does what it calls a "wine pull". The way this works is that the diverse membership hosts a series of holiday parties throughout the chapter region, where each couple/family brings two bottles of wine. One bottle is for the party and one is donated to the fund-raising event, which could be held at the same party or at a future event. The fund raising portion works thusly: the corks from the first bottles of wine (which was consumed at

the party) are put into a bin and tickets are sold for \$25. Each ticket buys a single “pull” — the opportunity to reach into the bin and grab a cork. The cork is matched up with the donated bottle, which is then presented to the puller.

- Some chapters found that their alumni got very excited about doing things for the local veterans. The North Texas chapter found that simply providing bicycles to the local homeless veterans made a significant difference in the vets’ ability to participate in the job market. Other chapters found that pizza parties at local veterans’ facilities became a much anticipated event for both the vets and the grads.
- One chapter noted that the most reliable way to get people together was to have a standing “no host”, no reservations lunch event at a local restaurant. The owner of the restaurant is pretty easy going about this, understanding that sometimes there will be a crowd and sometimes only a couple of people. This flexibility increased participation by enabling folks to take advantage of an unexpected light day while not penalizing them for an unexpected horrible day.
- One chapter has an award that it presents to the grad who does the most in the community each year. They use a cadet statue and it turns out to be a very popular award.

Part of the discussion naturally turned to finding out who is being transferred in to a chapter area. Lots and lots and lots of this discussion centered on, “can’t we just get a list of names?” The answer is probably not and even if one was provided, it wouldn’t be complete, accurate, or believable. The conversation then turned to ideas on how to alert the newly arrived grads to the fact that the chapters exist. A couple of ideas were flyers at local base housing offices and MWR, and lurking on Facebook groups for spouses.

An aside: This last discussion point was particularly intense and there seemed to be a nontrivial amount of frustration associated with getting the younger grads involved. This brought to mind my experience eating lunch with the cadets at Mitch’s on the first day of the conference. Besides the fact that the eating experience is completely and utterly different, including the abysmal quality of the food (think salt, salt, and more salt*), the conversations with the cadets was stunning. They were all delightful people, albeit with a strange fascination for flying helicopters, and willing to engage, but one of them came right out and asked why we were there, since the alumni hate the cadets so much. I wish I was making this up. I was dumbfounded, and assured the cadets that we not only don’t hate them, we are actively working to make things better for them. I rattled off some of the things that the AOG is up to, including funding some of the more exotic research efforts, and then started talking about all the little ways that the local chapters can help them once they graduate. It was very clear that no one had talked with them about the realities of life after graduation (or, if they had, it hadn’t sunk in) and that these young folks didn’t know enough to appreciate how useful things like a tip about a good restaurant or best commute routes can be.

* *Lunch consisted of 1) turkey burgers on whole wheat buns, with lettuce, tomato, and onion available, 2) potato chips in a large bag, 3) canned baked beans, 4) pineapple chunks, and 5) either water or packaged lemonade. The “turkey burgers” were indistinct blobs of grey that*

may well have included meat but tasted only of salt. The cadets dressed the burgers with the ketchup and mustard that was on the table. The potato chips were your standard garden variety chips. The baked beans looked like what you would get if you opened a tin and plopped it into a pot to warm up. No one, interestingly, touched the lemonade. The process of lunch has changed: the 4 degrees serve themselves first, followed by the 3 degrees, etc. This is by design due to some strange interpretation of “servant leadership”. The table manners are appalling. There did not seem to be any organization strategy other than reach and grab. The cadets were very nice and decent, but it was an event that made me sit back, ponder, and even do some research.

Summary

The Academy has passed the transition from “start up” to “established”, and it shows. The AOG and Endowment personnel are dedicated, thoughtful, and capable. Great ideas are being tossed about. The Alumni Community is putting their money where their mouths are. Frankly, it’s an exciting time. Watching the changes, thinking about what has been accomplished, and seeing the maturity set in is all kinds of awesome. I took a ton of photos; they are available online at

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1SrtkRgNJl9JnMpgSiyntXqn-EsQSBjZT>