

PREDICTING THE CAREER SUCCESS OF AIR FORCE ACADEMY CADETS

by

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

PREDICTING THE CAREER SUCCESS OF AIR FORCE ACADEMY CADETS

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University of Nebraska, 2008

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The purpose of this retrospective study using probit regression techniques was to determine the factors that best predicted the career success of Air Force Academy cadets and to develop a predictive equation based on those factors. The Department of Institutional Research at the United States Air Force Academy provided the data for the study. The Department of Institutional Research combined admissions and Academy data maintained at the Air Force Academy with aeronautical status data from the Air Force Personnel Center. The sample included all admitted cadets between the years 1982 and 1999 for which complete data were available.

Career success was defined as an additive function that combined years of service and the attainment of the appropriate rank for time served. The definition of success was tailored for each year group.

In order to achieve the purposes of the study, three hypotheses were tested. The hypotheses were: 1. admissions variables had a statistically significant impact on the career success of Air Force Academy cadets; 2. Academy variables had a statistically significant impact on the career success of Air Force Academy cadets; and 3. aeronautical status had a statistically significant impact on the career success of Air Force Academy cadets.

In order to test the hypotheses, six regressions were computed. The third regression was found to be the most accurate. It was 97.34% accurate in predicting which cadets would fail to achieve career success as Air Force officers. It was 12.50% accurate in predicting which cadets would achieve career success. The overall accuracy of the third regression was 75.57%.

These results suggest determinates of the career success of Air Force Academy cadets largely occur after graduation. These results also suggest it is possible to identify those likely not to achieve career success using admissions and Academy variables. Academy leadership may then design and implement interventions to increase the likelihood cadets will achieve career success. Recommendations for the Air Force Academy leadership were proposed based on these results.

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I would like to dedicate this work to my children, Seth, Leanne, Elle, and Evan, any children to come, my future grandchildren, and all those to come after. When you read this one day, I want you to know I thought of you long before you arrived. I love you. My hope is that completion of this work will set in motion events that will result in benefits, both tangible and intangible, that you will obtain.

There are a great many people I should thank for helping me in completing this work. I would like to thank my family for the sacrifices they made as I pursued this endeavor. Their sacrifices were many. I am especially thankful to my mother for making me do my homework as a child. I did not make her task easy. I will always carry your lessons with me and do my best to pass them on. I would like to thank my father for instilling in me a work ethic characterized by persistence that endures in even the most adverse circumstances. That ethic has paid many dividends, and I expect it will pay even more. I would especially like to thank my wife for both her support and tolerance. I certainly tried your patience. I am also grateful for having other positive role models in my family, namely Lieutenant Colonel Luis Cisneros, U.S. Army Retired, and Master Sergeant Adam Rodriguez, U.S. Army Retired. I love you all.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE - BACKGROUND

This dissertation addresses the career success of Air Force Academy cadets. Like all the military academies, the Air Force Academy defines its mission in a long-term context. Therefore, the effectiveness of the Air Force Academy can be determined only by assessing the performance of its graduates throughout their careers (Lovell, 1979). Indeed, “service academies have only one reason for their existence – to prepare young men and women for a career of service to the United States in the armed forces” (Caine, 1998, p. 235).

Past attempts to measure the Academy’s performance in producing career officers have been criticized for their narrow focus (Lovell, 1979). Previous work relied on indicators such as cadet attrition at the Academy, graduate separation rates from active service, and the per-cadet cost of education at the Academy (Lovell, 1979). While important, these measures constituted singular descriptive statistics that provided little insight into why a graduate did not serve for a career in the Air Force.

Given the Academy’s stated mission, the real measure of Academy performance is how its graduates perform in their Air Force careers. This study sought to move beyond singular measures and develop a model that provided insight into the factors that contributed to the career success of Academy cadets.

The Academy is a relatively young institution, and earlier studies did not have long-term data available. Additionally, the available data were not organized in a consistent and readily accessible way. At the time of this study, data collected in a uniform way over more than 20 years was available and made in-depth research possible.

This chapter begins with an outline of the purpose of the study. Next, the contextual background, characterized by the pressure to downsize the service since the latter stages of the Cold War (McCormick, 1998), is discussed. The theoretical base, rooted in labor economic theory, is explained in the following section. The model discussed in the theory section provides insight into which cadets will not complete a career in the Air Force. Labor economic theory also formed the basis for the development of the research questions and hypotheses. The methodology, assumptions, and limitations of the study are covered in the subsequent sections.

Problem Statement and Purpose

Success in college can be measured through metrics such as graduation rates and GPAs. The real indicator of quality for any educational program, however, is job performance (Moore, 2005). In prior research, “job performance or work competency evaluations [were] almost impossible to obtain, due to the complexities of conducting studies in the workplace” (Moore, 2005, p. 200).

Problem

The United States Air Force Academy offered an exciting research opportunity in this regard. Long-term data on Air Force Academy cadets, both at the Academy and in their officer careers, was made available. Established benchmarks for career progression also existed. Researchers therefore could determine success¹ beyond the campus based on the empirical achievement of stated goals. In the Academy’s case, the stated goal, or

¹ Success was defined for different year groups as an additive function that considered years of service and the achievement of specified ranks. The primary determinant of career success was 20 years of service and the achievement of the rank of lieutenant colonel. For officers who had not yet had the opportunity to serve for 20 years, success was determined by asking if the officers were still on active duty and if they had achieved the expected rank for their year group. More detailed information is included in Chapter 3.

mission, was the production of career Air Force officers. This study sought to solve the problem of determining what measurable factors, from the data provided, contributed to career success of Air Force Academy cadets.

Purpose

The purpose of the study, then, was to determine the factors that predicted career success of United States Air Force Academy cadets and to develop a predictive equation using those factors. Probit regression was used to analyze cadet and career data obtained from the Academy's Department of Institutional Research and the Air Force Personnel Center.

Context

Cyclical Air Force personnel policy formed the context for the study. There are extended periods when large numbers of officers are maintained on active duty. These periods are followed by draw-downs of personnel. Systematic inefficiencies in the personnel system make it difficult to maintain an optimal number of officers – or a number of officers appropriate for assigned tasks. Cyclical Air Force personnel policy and the inefficient Air Force personnel system formed the context against which Air Force Academy graduates decided to remain in or leave the Air Force.

The Air Force personnel policies that impacted individuals in the sample year groups of this study (1982-1999) are discussed below. The discussion focuses on robust funding during the Cold War, a drawdown in the early 1990s, a compensatory period when the Air Force offered bonuses designed to retain officers, and another downsizing

initiative in the late 1990s (Galway, 2005). The inefficiencies associated with the Air Force personnel system are then addressed.

Personnel Reductions After the Cold War

During the Cold War, the military benefited from seemingly endless funding for personnel and equipment. After the Cold War, however, the U.S. military pursued personnel reduction programs despite involvement in ongoing conflicts. All services experienced some degree of downsizing, even during the first Gulf War (Galway, 2005).

After the Gulf War, the Air Force found itself with fewer personnel while committed to more operations. These operations included enforcing the Northern and Southern No-Fly Zones in Iraq, both of which consumed considerable resources (Galway, 2005). The Air Force also became involved in actions against Serbia, numerous deployments in support of the war on terror, and the second Gulf War in 2003 (Galway, 2005). The Air Force had to do more with less as Congress directed resources away from the military toward other national priorities.

Consequences of the Reduction During the Early 1990s

The cutbacks of the 1990s, combined with increased operational requirements, “left the Air Force with severe manpower problems at the beginning of the 21st century. Many career fields were under-strength: authorizations went unfilled, and many fields had severe skill imbalances, such as a dearth of mid-level people” (Galway, 2005, p. xiii). Even when some career fields were officially fully staffed, they still had difficulty meeting operational demands. Although operational requirements had increased, the definition of “fully-staffed” was adjusted to include fewer personnel. For example, some

units might have been fully staffed according to authorized billets but were nevertheless deployed overseas six months or more every year (Galway, 2005).

The imprecise definition of “stressed,” or undermanned, career fields complicated the already difficult situation. In general, career fields that have difficulty keeping up with operational demands are identified as stressed, but that assessment is imprecise and often subjective. To identify stressed fields, Career Field Managers and Air Force leadership, rather than relying on quantitative analysis, developed a list of strained career fields largely through agreement after discussions about difficulties various career fields were having. That process left some fields with an inadequate number of people with the right skill sets (Galway, 2005, p. 8).

Bonuses Between Reductions

The Air Force recognized it cut too many officers in some fields during the early 1990s. In an attempt to remedy the situation, the Air Force offered bonuses to mid-grade officers in those career fields. It may have seemed logical that bonuses would fix personnel shortages, but RAND found little evidence that appropriate statistical analysis and forecasting occurred before the Air Force implemented the bonus programs (Galway, 2005). The failure to adequately use statistical models as a basis for offering bonuses caused some career fields to have too many officers and, in part, contributed to the decision to implement another downsizing effort in 2004.²

² Many of the same officers who were offered bonuses to stay in the late 1990s and early 2000s were offered incentives to leave as part of the reduction program that began in 2004. In late 2006, Air Force Personnel Center documents listed the Communications Officer career field, one that received sizable bonuses a few years earlier, as the most bloated in the Air Force. In some cases, Communications officers were offered over \$100,000 to separate from active duty.

A Second Reduction Effort

The downsizing effort that began in 2004 was known as Force Shaping. As a whole, the Air Force had more personnel than Congress would continue to authorize. Other services, the Army in particular, required more funding as a result of operational requirements in Afghanistan and Iraq. Congress decided to reallocate some funds from the Air Force to help fund the Army's operations.

Force Shaping largely effected officers who graduated during the 1990s. The program included a combination of voluntary and involuntary separations and retirements. The Air Force first offered incentive pay for officers to leave. After offering voluntary separation incentives, the Air Force began to identify and involuntarily separate officers through Reduction in Force (RIF) boards and mandatory retirements.

The implicit assumption of the involuntary separation programs was that the Air Force could effectively determine the officers it valued most highly and separate those of lesser relative value to the service. The problem with that assumption was that the selection was "highly subjective, imprecise, and unpredictable. A range of factors – luck, timing, and composition of the board – all [came] into play in the process" (McCormick, 1998, p. 78). Additionally, the voluntary separation programs likely provided an incentive for some of the best officers to leave (a point on which the theoretical base elaborates). The downsizing programs, both voluntary and involuntary, exacerbated problems associated with the inefficient personnel system.

An Inefficient Personnel System

Inefficiencies in the personnel system resulting from decentralization, limited opportunities for lateral entry into the officer corps, and Congressional budget constraints are outlined in this section. A basic knowledge of these inefficiencies contributed to the development of the theoretical base of the study. The theoretical base then formed the basis for the development of the research and hypotheses.

A Decentralized System

The Air Force personnel system was, and remains, remarkably decentralized. The many people and organizations involved include “recruiters, commissioning sources, technical schools, and accessions personnel, commanders, Major Command staffs, Air Force Personnel Center assignment teams, functional managers, manpower experts, [and] Air Staff offices” (Galway, 2005, p. 9). Actions undertaken by one entity inevitably impact the others. RAND found these agencies frequently acted without consulting the others. Those actions often did not align with those of other agencies and sometimes even worked counter to them (Galway, 2005).

The decentralized nature of the Air Force personnel system creates significant disconnects in the management of officers. For example, Career Field Managers may be aware of prevailing problems but have little ability to effect change. The Air Force personnel management system performs well at placing officers in their next assignments (Galway, 2005). But “the underlying problem is that the Air force does not have strong management institutions at the operational and strategic levels to address the fundamental causes of the under-strength issues” (Galway, 2005, p. 55). Career Field Managers were

simply unable to assign personnel according to their academic degrees, they had no influence over bonus programs designed to provide incentives for officers to remain in the Air Force, and they had limited influence over career path guidance (Galway, 2005).

Many professionals working in the Air Force personnel community fully understood these problems and even had possible resolutions. Still, their authority to adjust policy has been limited (Galway, 2005). Additionally, Career Field Managers had to focus on the immediate problem of placing officers in vacant positions and were not well positioned to consider long-term policies that would have benefited the Air Force, to include ensuring each career field had the right number of people with the right skill sets and experience to achieve the mission (Galway, 2005).

Limited Lateral Entry

The problems associated with a decentralized personnel system were complicated by the fact that the Air Force personnel system was a closed one. The Air Force had limited ability to laterally hire in a manner similar to the private sector of the economy. For most career fields, one must enter the service at the bottom and move up through the hierarchical rank system. “With little lateral entry, the shape of career fields [was] largely determined by the composition of new accessions” (Galway, 2005, p. 17). Therefore, effective personnel management required monitoring of recruitment, retention, promotion, and training and education opportunities. “The sequential, multiyear aspect of managing the force [required] a deep understanding of the dynamics of a system in which several years of high attrition can cause deficits that persist for a decade or more” (Galway, 2005, pp. 3-4).

With limited lateral entry, accessions of new officers took on increased importance as the service attempted to meet the requirements of higher ranks (Galway, 2005). The hope was that bringing in more lieutenants than were necessary would eventually result in adequate numbers of senior captains and field-grade officers remaining in the service. That hope was “unrealistic, considering that the over-manning of lieutenant slots in the mid-1990s [did not alleviate] the shortfalls in captains and field-grade . . . officers in the early 2000s” (Galway, 2005, p. 50).

Available statistical models that have strong limitations further complicated the situation for personnel managers. “Most personnel models are static in the sense that they are incapable of portraying dynamic near-term and long-term impacts of dramatic changes or shocks to the personnel system as it existed in the past. These assumptions fail to account for the effects that a dramatic disturbance like downsizing might have on short-term and long-term retention rates” (McCormick, 1998, p. 109).

Legal Constraints

The Air Force also had to contend with budgetary limitations imposed by Congress through the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA). DOPMA limits the number of individuals within each rank (Galway, 2005). The rank quotas outlined by DOPMA are pseudo arbitrary. They are more often driven more by budgetary constraints than by operational requirements and strategy (McCormick, 1998). Additionally, DOPMA requires the service maintain the allocated number of officers within one percent. That is a very narrow window, especially without the ability to hire laterally.

To ensure the requisite number of officers each year, the Air Force regularly uses an overage of lieutenants as a means to meet personnel requirements mandated by Congress. This practice creates a glut of officers in one year group that will have to be dealt with in the future. Eventually, the service will have to cut personnel. The cuts are frequently too deep, a problem often not realized for several years. At that point, the service will find itself with a shortage of officers and be forced to, once again, bring in many more lieutenants than it anticipated. And the cycle begins again. This was the exact cycle experienced by the Air Force in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Additionally, over-manning of lieutenants, in many career fields, caused disillusionment resulting from “poor assignment and development opportunities, thereby [making lieutenants] less likely to remain in the Air Force as captains when their initial service obligation ends” (Galway, 2005, p. 50). Initial assignments for many junior officers were simply inappropriate. They may have been placed in unchallenging jobs or in positions that required much more experience, skill, and knowledge than they had the opportunity to obtain. Lieutenant utilization was (and still is) not formalized. Jaded young officers faced with “unattractive career prospects” were more likely to leave the service (Galway, 2005, p. 53).

From Context to Theory

Cyclical Air Force personnel policy and the inefficiencies just described impacted the decisions of all Air Force Academy graduates considered in this study (the classes of 1982 through 1999). The situation caused uncertainty and provided many graduates in these year groups with an incentive to leave the Air Force before serving for a complete

career. This uncertainty, caused by varying personnel policies over time and the frustration caused by an inefficient personnel management system (Shaud, 1967), formed the basis for the theory used in this study.

Uncertainty and frustration associated with service in the Air Force contribute to a higher opportunity cost. As the cost of service increases, officers with other opportunities will be more likely to leave the Air Force and pursue those opportunities. Officers with other opportunities are likely of higher quality and of higher relative value to the Air Force. The Air Force, through its varying personnel policies and inefficient personnel management system, then, creates conditions that likely encouraged some of its best officers to leave the service. This theory is elaborated on in the next section.

Theoretical Base

The ups and downs of Air Force personnel policy, which imply graduates must contend with an uncertain environment, combined with frustration caused by an inefficient personnel management system (Shaud, 1967) increase the cost associated with career service. Put another way, the decision to stay or leave is an economic one. Therefore, this study was rooted in the concepts of human capital and labor economic theory. That theory suggests the best officers, or those with the highest degree of human capital, will have an incentive to leave the Air Force and pursue other opportunities.

Education and Human Capital Development

There are two views about education and human capital development. The first is that education enhances human capital and increases productivity. The second is that education simply provides a screen for talented people and certificates of education