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An Approach for a Character Development Strategy for the Center for University Studies

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Abstract: To improve the conditions for developing leaders' character and to provide a better link between its strategic leadership objectives and its curriculum, the Center for University Studies (CUS) is designing its Character Development Strategy (CDS). The CUS commanding staff consider that such as strategy will help CUS personnel at all levels unify the efforts and consolidate the approaches of educating character. Preexisting studies pertinent to the field of character development, the CUS experience and legacy, experiences at other military and defense academies, and the data collected through focus groups will be the main building blocks of the CUS strategy. An unconstrained and holistic approach is intended, trying to consider all relevant variables that affect or are part of the CUS programs. Through this article, we intend to share important findings regarding our efforts to come up with the methodology we will adapt for designing the CUS CDS; however, no findings or outcomes of the actual document are discussed here, as that phase of the project has not occurred yet. The complexity of the project, the intangible nature of the topic, the required comprehensive approach, the number of stakeholders involved, the methodological limitations, and CUS's peculiar system of education are some of the acknowledged challenges in designing an effective strategy.

Keywords: Character; Center for University Studies; Leadership; Kosovo; Strategy; Education.

Introduction

The Center for University Studies (CUS) is an institution that educates young officers for the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and, lately, for the Armed Forces of the Republic of Albania. The CUS maintains a four-year curriculum that contains four programs: Academic, Professional, Physical Training, and Leadership. It was founded in 2005 by two graduates of The Citadel and has adopted many elements from the education provided at that institution, including many of its traditions, rules, and uniforms. A key element that the CUS has adopted from The Citadel is its Fourth-Class System. The Fourth-Class System is a rigorous and high-stress approach to leader development that intends to instill values of Honor, Duty, and Respect in the cadets. In the case of the CUS, this approach has produced disciplined and physically and mentally tough officers.

Nonetheless, in recent years, the CUS has established several mechanisms to receive structured feedback from stakeholders, including cadets, instructors, and commanding staff of the CUS, as well as the respective chain of command of the CUS graduates. While the feedback has been largely positive, it has drawn attention to several shortcomings. Some of the most worrisome findings are related to shortcomings in interpersonal skills and ethics, as well as creative and critical thinking. After discussing and analyzing the findings, it has become evident that the CUS needs to undertake a thorough review of its approach to character development.

We believe that, while the programs that the CUS provides all contain elements of the desired character traits for our cadets, there is a lack of cohesion among the programs. We have concluded that such a discrepancy is due to not having a written strategy that would encompass the four programs of study and address character development in a deliberate way. Additionally, over the years, we have observed the CUS commanding staff, instructors, and cadets lack the synergy of efforts regarding the desirable outcomes of the CUS education. As such, we are inclined to believe that our approach to character development is not sufficiently comprehensive.

Through their competency and esteemed leadership, the graduates of the CUS have played a preeminent role in most of the developments inside the KSF. This profound impact of the CUS can be attributed to the return of its qualitative education, whose desired end state has been to graduate competent leaders of character. However, the CUS lacks a strategy that would tackle this desired end state in a more deliberate and strategic way. In its endeavors to improve the conditions for success, the CUS is designing the Character Development Strategy (CDS), hoping to unify and consolidate the approaches and efforts of educating character.

The CUS pursues character education because it considers that the characters of leaders play an essential role in military success, an idea that has been proven by both "a millennia of practical experience, and more recently, on psychological research."[1] Murray et al. argue that the need to educate character can be explained both empirically and conceptually.[2] On a conceptual level, as they conclude, because of the interdependency of the individuals, societies cannot sustain themselves if they do not educate character. On an empirical level, a notable body of research shows the impact of character education on character development as well as on other fundamental outcomes such as academic performance and organizational success. Different studies support the idea that developing character helps the person's key components thrive, such as competence, connection, confidence, and caring, and enables the person to make a positive contribution to his/her own lives, families, and communities.[3]

Moreover, ethical considerations are the common theme of the strategies pertinent to human performance optimization, especially in highly competitive, high-stress, and high-stakes-operating organizations.[4] Although success heavily relies on competency, it is essential that soldiers possess positive character traits in order to function effectively in combat and everyday life, maintain the morale and cohesion of the unit, and achieve strategic success.[5] Even though the character traits of every soldier matter, the military gives special attention to the character education of its leaders because of their role in security and lethality matters, but most importantly, because of their power to influence the organization.[6]

This article intends to share important findings regarding our efforts for designing the CDS for the CUS. After reviewing the literature on the topic, we came up with the

methodology that we need to apply in order to produce this strategy. No findings or outcomes of the actual CDS are discussed in this article, as we have not reached that phase of the project yet. In defining the scope of this strategy, we limit it to being compatible with the existing four programs of study at the CUS, and to being in harmony with the relevant overarching legislation and ethical norms. Otherwise, we intend to pursue an unconstrained and comprehensive approach trying to take into consideration all relevant variables that affect or are part of the CUS programs.

What is a Leader of Character?

For the CUS, it is of utmost importance to develop leaders of character. Based on the principles of transformational leadership laid out by Bernard Bass and Ronald Riggio[7], we believe that these leaders will be able to influence their subordinates and have a positive impact on the whole KSF. Nevertheless, due to our concerns regarding the comprehensiveness of our approach toward character development, as mentioned above, we believe that it is necessary to define and explain some key terms.

In order to properly formulate the problem addressed in this paper, it is important to first define what we mean by the term "character." Character is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person, group, or nation."[8] Those traits or characteristics are numerous and can include compassion, honesty, grit, fortitude, tolerance, integrity, and so on. Different individuals exhibit different levels of these traits.

However, according to Davis, character is not only the sum of all traits; but it is also important how these traits are organized.[9] Based on these claims, we can argue that every individual has a character, and considering the high number of traits and their interplay, we can argue that every person has a unique character. Thus, especially to individuals that are not familiar with the context, it may not necessarily be self-evident what is specifically implied by the use of the term Leader of Character, used by the CUS and many other military academies.

A common way of perceiving what is meant by character in the notion Leader of Character is "the relatively settled general disposition of a person to do what is morally good."[10] In a more general context, character can also be viewed as "the set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable one to function as a moral agent, to perform optimally, to effectively pursue knowledge and intellectual flourishing, and to be an effective member of society"[11] or "the set of positive attributes, or virtues, that are necessary for promoting positive individual—context relations, and particularly, positive individual to individual relations within a specific context."[12] Military academies, including the CUS, tend to view it similarly, albeit in these cases, character is aligned with the values of the institution. For example, the United States Air Force Academy's (USAFA) Leader of Character 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; and,
- Elevates performance toward a common and noble purpose."[13]

How to Educate Leaders of Character?

Analyzing the programs of study at various military academies, it becomes evident that these institutions are interested in developing the character of their cadets by integrating or ensuring that preset values are embedded in their character. This is also true for the CUS. Attempts to shape someone's character in an organized manner are typically referred to as character education or character development. Different institutions have varying degrees of emphasis on character development—and the approaches used to achieve it also differ significantly.

However, there are opponents of this idea who argue that character education is pointless since the determinants of particular situations override character.[14] Nonetheless, the CUS and virtually all military academies engage in character development in one way or another and, therefore, do not share those views. On the contrary, character development, as mentioned above, is one of the main lines of effort in the CUS and, arguably, in many other military academies. In the CUS, we attempt to integrate character development in every program of our curriculum.

Davis organizes the approaches toward character development into three main categories.[15] The first one is referred to as Simple Moral Education, which can be understood as providing information to students about morals in a classroom.[16] The second type, referred to as Just Community Education, emphasizes the students' right to choose and to make democratic decisions within and outside the classroom.[17] This approach goes beyond classroom lectures of morals but does not involve every part of the institution providing the education.[18] The third type, referred to as Simple Character Education, is an approach that extends beyond the classroom and intends to shape students' characters gradually by emphasizing good behavior and integrating character education in every facet of the institution's education system[19]. This last type is widespread among military academies, including the CUS. While there are advantages and disadvantages to each approach, Simple Character Education seems to have the most impact on the character, although more long-term studies are still required.[20]

Due to the importance of character development for the CUS, we intend to continue relying on Simple Character Education for our character development efforts. However, we are interested in utilizing a systematic, comprehensive, and evidence-based approach for this purpose. One such approach is the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) theory to character development. According to the RDS theory, "character development occurs through adaptive developmental regulations between individuals."[21] Instead of looking at individual cadets, this approach shifts the focus to the staff and overall corps of cadets

and emphasizes the relationships and impact on each other. This approach to character development derives from the process-relational paradigm and has a focus on:

- Process: The developmental system undergoing changes in a systematic manner;

- Holism: Events and entities are not isolated from their context; instead, their meaning is derived by it;

- Relational analysis: Assessing the influential bidirectional relations between entities; and

- Use of multiple perspectives: The use of ideas from various models of change.[22] Considering these features of RDS, which we believe to be appropriate for character development, and the fact that there is a growing body of research to support this approach, we intend to rely heavily on the principles of the RDS theory for our character development efforts.

To effectively develop leaders of character through our new approach, we foresee a considerable number of changes that need to be carried out within the CUS. In order to implement such changes, we believe that it is necessary to design a deliberate strategy. Referring to Mintzberg's work for strategic approaches, we believe that the Ideological Strategy would fit best to the CUS context.[23] According to Mintzberg, this type of strategy is appropriate in cases where the vision and values of an organization are shared by its members and pursued as an ideology.[24] The author claims that this is a highly deliberate type of strategy and that the intentions of such strategies are typically accepted well by the members of the organization.[25] We believe that, due to the importance of character development for the CUS and the complexity of the issue, it is of great importance for the staff members to share a common set of values and beliefs and to pursue the vision of the CUS.

We believe that this type of strategy is better suited for the CUS needs as opposed to, for example, the planned strategy.[26] We believe that the planned strategy would not be suitable to our context for two main reasons. First, this type of strategy is more appropriate for larger organizations operating in a controllable or predictable environment, which is not the case with the CUS [27]. Second, this type of strategy requires detailed planning, scheduling and budgeting, which leaves no room for adjustments that may be necessary due to the subjectivity of the issue and the ever-changing context.

Additionally, an entrepreneurial strategy would not be suitable, primarily, since the vision in this type of strategy only belongs to one individual or small group of individuals.[28] This is not appropriate in our case, primarily because at CUS the command structure changes fairly often and, if the vision is not shared by everyone, there is a serious likelihood of failure since its biggest sponsors, and those who understand it best, will leave. Overall, the other types of strategies proposed by Mintzberg are not suitable primarily because of the peculiar nature of character development, which requires a shared vision that is not imposed from the outside and does not combine with or compromise other strategies.[29] Another reason why other types of strategies are not suitable is because this will be the main strategy of the CUS.

Our strategy will have a strong focus on goals and a weaker focus on the process of achieving those goals. Based on Hindenburg's work, this would make our strategy development process a Guided Learning Process.[30] We believe this is suitable because we want the CUS to be a learning organization and to adapt to its context in order to achieve its mission.[31] However, we also foresee difficulties in implementation, mainly due to the nature and type of strategy, the strategy development process as well as the often-reported difficulties in strategy development.[32] Nonetheless, we plan to take measures to mitigate implementation difficulties. These measures and the overall methodology are explained in the following section.

How Will the CUS Come Up With Its CDS?

Coming up with a strategy for character development in itself consists of undergoing some sort of qualitative research. Therefore, we intend to utilize qualitative methods to get to the information needed for issuing this strategy. However, we will not rigorously follow any research method, theoretical approach, or preexisting data-analyzing tool. The data will be gathered from primary and secondary sources. Our primary source material will be the information we intend to gather through focus groups. Secondary sources are the publicly available academic materials on the topic, which include mainly academic journal articles and various publications related to character development from military academies and other institutions in other countries.

Preexisting studies conducted on the field of character and its development provide a valuable basis on how to approach the issue. These studies are particularly important for the strategy designers because they help understand the complex nature of character development and expand their perspectives. Nevertheless, the research conducted on this field is relatively sparse and there are gaps where extensive research is needed. Even though some have considered the last two decades to be a renaissance of character studies and its institutional and social context, the intangible nature of the issue makes it difficult to reach practical and adoptable conclusions.[33]

However, learning how others deal with such an issue is as much practically helpful as it is problematic. While some of the world's elite military or defense academies enjoy a legacy of up to three centuries, no legacy of a systematic and empirically applied model that has been theoretically predicted can be easily observed among them. Strategies of the renowned leader development institutions cannot be blindly copied because of the idiographic and relational nature of character development.[34] Moreover, assessment of the performance and effectiveness of character education programs rests in very turbid waters. The question that arises is that how do we know whether their programs yield leaders of character? While some of them have addressed this matter deliberately, can other educational institutions, due to cultural context, for example, yield better leaders? A limitation on this regard is the language barrier that predominantly forces us to shift our focus toward "western culture." Nonetheless, there is a priceless opportunity to learn from

institutions such as the USAFA or the United States Military Academy (USMA) that have been the subject of several studies on the field of character development. Despite contextual differences, we can learn numerous lessons from them and where possible even pursue a "copy policy" approach.

As for the primary data, there will be two different focus groups for two different themes. The first focus group will work on "revising the CUS vision and mission" and its participants will consist of KSF key leadership figures, the CUS Commander, CUS Quality Insurance Officer, and a moderator. This will be a small focus group with an approximate size of n=6. The second focus group will have a discussion on "the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) questions." Its participants will consist of KSF officers who graduated from the CUS, CUS cadets, KSF officers who graduated from foreign military academies, a moderator, and a psychologist as an observer. The CUS graduates and cadets will be randomly selected one per class. The group will have an approximate size of n=25. Because of the large size, the group will be divided into two with the same representation mix, where the same discussion will take place for both groups.

Considering the context-specific nature of the issue, we believe the participants selected to be the experts in the field and that the focus group method serves best the purpose. As for the first focus group, by KSF key leadership figures, we mean persons of the CUS higher chain of command who indeed share the responsibility for the CUS mission and vision. As for the second focus group, KSF officers who have graduated from the CUS possess a working experience in KSF and know the values and leadership competencies that are required from them by their employers. They are also familiar with the CUS system from which they graduated. Secondly, current CUS cadets provide an inside perspective of the ongoing situation within the CUS. Thirdly, KSF officers who have graduated from foreign military academies provide insights into the character development programs of their respective academies. Like other KSF officers, they also are aware of the values and leadership competencies that their work requires. Whereas, the commander of the CUS will moderate the first focus group while the deputy commander will moderate the second.

It is important to note that the CUS CDS should be compatible with the existing four programs of study of the CUS. Moreover, it should be in harmony with the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, KSF's legislation and Code of Ethics, the CUS Code of Honor, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, respectful to all people indiscriminate of their background (ethnicity, religion, gender, race, sexual orientation, and/or innate disabilities). Otherwise, we intend to pursue an unconstrained, comprehensive, and holistic approach, trying to take into consideration all relevant variables that affect or are part of the CUS programs. Apart from the KSF's Code of Ethics, this project is relatively unbounded in legal terms by any other top-down KSF document pertinent to norms relating to character or the philosophy of leadership. In effect, the CUS effort to create this strategy can be described as a bottom-up approach, since it will orient its graduates with the moral values as defined by its CDS who will share the same philosophy and impact wherever they serve.

Even though the document's structure and contents highly depend on the outcomes from the primary and secondary sources, at this stage, we consider that the strategy should comprise the following themes: 1) Vision, 2) Mission, 3) Values, 4) Means, including mechanisms for responsibilities, accountability, assessment, mentoring, and effectiveness, and 5) Long-term Performance Indicators. While designing the CDS, the contributors will adhere to the principles of effective character education of the PRIMED model,[35] which we consider helpful in yielding a comprehensive but focused approach:

1) Prioritization: Institutional prioritization of the character development program;

2) Relationships: The deliberate and strategic targeting of the stakeholder's development of healthy relationships;

3) Internalization: The means should lead to the growth of intrinsic motivation to possess the targeted values;

4) Modeling: Leaders should be exemplars of the character values;

5) Empowerment: The deliberate and strategic targeting of how to respect the empowerment need; and

6) Developmental Pedagogy: How to make character development a long-term perspective.

Anticipating Potential Barriers

Designing a CDS for the CUS carries in itself numerous difficulties and limitations. Even though we expect a more thorough understanding of the potential barriers after the SWOT analysis, those that we have already identified include:

1) The problem of character development requires a comprehensive approach and understanding. Yet, among the designers of the CUS CDS, there is certainly a degree of judgmental bias, an inability to "think outside of the box," to think critically and foresee a shift in the system. This could be mitigated through effective focus group discussions, consulting with experts of relevant fields and by asking them to review the draft strategy.

2) While the strategy will be applicable to the CUS commanding staff and instructors, inconsistent and incompatible changes in the CUS organizational structure and personnel shifts may negatively affect the strategy's mechanisms in place.

3) Pitfalls in the focus group method can include the dominance effect, halo effect, or groupthink effect. To mitigate these, the moderator should be trained on how to avoid these phenomena during the discussions.

Conclusion

In its attempt to provide a better link between the strategic leadership objectives and its programs, as well as to improve the conditions for developing leaders' character, the CUS is designing its CDS. The CUS commanding staff considers that such a strategy will

help CUS personnel at all levels to unify their efforts and consolidate the approaches of developing character. To design the strategy, the CUS is reviewing the existing literature on the topic; learning from the experiences of other military and defense academies; and analyzing data which will be collected through focus groups. It is for the designers of this strategy to acknowledge the complexity of the project due to the intangible nature of the topic, the comprehensive approach required, the number of stakeholders involved, the methodological limitations, and CUS's own unique system. Therefore, even minor miscarriages would lead to fruitless efforts, wasted resources, and an overall ineffective strategy. Nevertheless, we believe that the approach presented here will enable us to design a CDS that appropriately addresses our requirements for developing leaders of character.

Lirim Bllaca is the deputy commander and head instructor of the CUS, where he graduated in 2013. He received his bachelor of science in applied arts and science from RIT Kosovo in 2013 and his master's of public management from the University of Potsdam, Germany in 2017. Bllaca completed the U.S. Army Signal Basic Officer Leadership Course in Fort Gordon, Georgia (USA) in 2018. He has served as a platoon leader and personnel officer in the KSF. Additionally, he also works as a researcher and consultant in the areas of ICT, information security and business continuity.

Alisa Ramadani is a fourth-year cadet at the CUS/KSF. Ramadani was a second-year management student at the University of Prishtina before she decided to join KSF. She received her bachelor of science in applied arts and aciences from RIT Kosovo in May 2021. Most of the classes she completed were in peace and conflict studies and international relations. Ramadani is currently working on her master's degree in strategic foresight and innovation in RIT Kosovo.

Ali Haxhimustafa is the commander of the CUS. He was among the cadets of the first class that graduated from the CUS in 2009. He received his bachelor of social science from RIT Kosovo. Haxhimustafa completed the U.S. Army Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course, in Fort Benning, Georgia (USA), Junior Staff Course in Lithuanian Military Academy, UNMO with the German Army, and PASS and SRS courses at the Marshall Center. He also holds an MBA from Sheffield University. Previously, he served as platoon leader, company commander, and battalion executive officer.

Premtim Shaqiri is an instructor at the CUS, where he graduated in 2018. He received his bachelor of science in applied arts and sciences from RIT Kosovo in 2018. Shaqiri completed the Military Intelligence Basic Officer Leader Course in Fort Huachuca, Arizona (USA) in 2020. He has served as a platoon leader and as a training officer at Brigade's HQ at the KSF, while recently, he has been an active member at the Sense Cyber Research Center (NGO).

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For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference.
Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation,* 73-78.
Roehrig, "Stability or Instability?," 131.

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