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Excellence of Air Force Academy's educational programs at risk if civilian faculty cuts continue (Opinion)

Decimating the successful partnership of civilian and active-duty faculty who deliver on USAFA's complex teaching mission unjustified



President Donald Trump with cadets during the U.S. Air Force Academy Graduation on May 30, 2019 in Colorado Springs. This op-ed questions the extent our nation can afford the overtly political notions advocated by Trump's Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth to reshape the education of our next generation of military thought leaders. (Photo by RJ Sangosti/The Denver Post).

By **THOMAS BEWLEY** and **91 COSIGNERS** | Guest Commentary

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As longtime supporters of our military service academies, the more than 90 cosigners of this column are alarmed by recent developments that indicate a troubling shift in the direction of the U.S. Air Force Academy. Recent actions, as well as internal reports of additional actions being planned, indicate that the current Air Force Academy superintendent, Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, is in the process of effecting a massive reduction in civilian faculty at the academy, and concomitant reductions in academic majors, minors, and advanced coursework.

The Academy has, over decades, built both academic and military programs that have rightly earned numerous [outstanding rankings](#) and distinguished reputations, attracting top-tier students and faculty from across the nation and around the world. That progress is at risk of being torn asunder in a short period of time.

Civilian faculty, almost all with PhDs and deep backgrounds in both education and related research (including many experienced U.S. military veterans), bring depth, balance, continuity, and forward-looking insights to cadet education. Civilian faculty work effectively in close collaboration with active-duty instructors. Decimating the civilian faculty ranks in this partnership risks diminishing the U.S. Air Force Academy's (USAFA) academic excellence and the potential of its graduates to grow into impactful thought leaders in key areas relevant to the complex and critical war-fighting, peace-keeping, and humanitarian missions of our modern military. It even puts at risk USAFA's basic accreditations in related technical fields.

Further, the proposed reduction to the civilian/military faculty ratio is not actually cost-cutting; on the contrary, according to a 2013 Air Force-sponsored [study](#), *increasing* the civilian/military faculty ratio is the most cost-effective approach to delivering its academic programs.

Successful major educational institutions like the Air Force Academy, which are guided academically by the collective expertise of their many senior faculty, operate much differently than Forward Operating Bases. Profound changes to their educational structure must proceed with transparent dialogue and accountability during "predecisional" times, lest such changes threaten to damage the Academy's proud academic heritage and erode public trust. With this backdrop, the recent quiet removal of the word "educate" from the USAFA mission statement appears to be not simply an oversight, but a further tangible indicator that academic excellence is being devalued in favor of military training and short-term political expediency.

Does USAFA have any inefficiencies or redundancies? Yes. Reducing them, and holding cadets to an even higher academic standard, requires the informed use of a scalpel, not a misdirected chainsaw. We, the undersigned, thus urge the Air Force leadership, concerned citizens, alumni, parents, and elected officials to seek clarity and ensure that forthcoming major decisions affecting USAFA's academic future remain transparent, mission-aligned, and in the best interest of our nation.

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AdChoices 

This op-ed expresses the respectful views of its more than 90 cosigners, whose names are listed below, and Thomas Bewley, a senior civilian visiting professor in mechanical engineering at USAFA specializing in the development and coordination of autonomous collaborative platforms. Cosigners include three retired major generals (one a former USAFA vice superintendent), a retired senior executive service member, four retired USAFA department heads, the surviving spouse of the undersecretary of the Air Force, 12 retired colonels, and 20 retired lieutenant colonels/O-5s. The text of this op-ed was written collectively by several people in this distinguished group.

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Maj. Gen. (ret) Irv Halter (USAFA '77, USAFA vice superintendent '05-'06)

Maj. Gen. (ret) Sean Lee Murphy (USAFA '81, deputy AF surgeon general '19-'21)

Brig. Gen. (ret) David S. Gibson, (USAFA permanent professor and head, computer and cyber science '02-'17)

Brig. Gen. (ret) John Putnam (USAFA permanent professor and head, biology '06-'16)

Brig. Gen. (ret) Michael E. Van Valkenburg (USAFA permanent professor and head, chemistry, '05-'18)

SES/Col. (ret) Donald Erbschloe, (command pilot, chief Scientist of USAF AMC, 3 USAFA tours)

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Col. (ret) Carlos Bertha (tenured philosophy professor at USAFA '00-'24)

Col. (ret) Eileen Bjorkman (USAF Test Pilot School '86, executive director AF Test Center '19-'24)

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Lt. Col. (ret) Harry Gross (USAFA '83, assistant professor astronautics '87-'90)

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Lt. Col. (ret) David Maher (USAFA '78)

Lt. Col. (ret) Emily Marr (USAFA '02, USAFA instructor of biology)

Lt. Col. (ret) Andrew Schlachter, (USAF intelligence officer, adjunct professor)

Lt. Col. (ret) Kenric Smith (USAFA '81, fighter pilot)

Lt. Col. (ret) Xavier Streeter (USAFA '81)

Lt. Col. (ret) Edward Tomme, (USAFA '85, USAFA professor of physics '95-'98 & '00-'03)

Lt. Col. (ret) Jason Williams (USAFA '00, squadron commander '16-'20)

Lt. Col. (ret) Sandra Wilson (USAFA '99, USAFA faculty '07-'10, '17-'19, '20-'25)

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Capt. Dominique Dalton (USAFA '18, USAF RPA Pilot)

Capt. Robert Doby (USAFA '17, intelligence officer)

Capt. Patrick Madden (USAFA '15, T-6 instructor pilot '23-25)

Capt. Allante Staten (USAFA '14, USAF force support officer '14 – '19)

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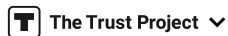
Yoram Yadlin (senior engineer (ret) at the Boeing Company)

Lynne Abraham-Yadlin (proud parent of USAFA '09 grad currently earning PhD at Harvard)

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