



# Classwork and the Corps—The Symbiotic Relationship Between Curricular and Co-Curricular Learning for Military Cadets Majoring in History

## ABSTRACT

Formal post-secondary education is a critical component of the development of cadets into prospective officers at a United States senior military college. This narrative inquiry study articulates that a strong symbiotic relationship exists between student success in the Corps of Cadets at a senior military college and student success in history classes. Alternately, student success in the Corps of Cadets engendered student success in history classes and vice versa. This relationship is present concerning cadets' academic, personal, and professional development. Study participants identified the value of both their curricular learning through history courses as well as their co-curricular engagements in the Corps of Cadets. Plowing new ground, this study explores a population—namely cadet officers at a United States senior military college—that researchers have largely neglected from scholarship in higher education at large and the scholarship of teaching and learning in particular.

## KEYWORDS

co-curricular, history education, military education, narrative inquiry, cadets

## INTRODUCTION

The University of North Georgia (UNG), incorporated in 1871 as the North Georgia Agricultural College, is one of six senior military colleges in the United States (University of North Georgia n.d.-a).<sup>1</sup> Military education has always assumed a seminal role at UNG. The state of Georgia established the institution via funds from the Morrill Act, a piece of federal legislation (National Archives n.d.) which required such institutions to offer instruction in military tactics (Adams, Lanford, and Mayernick 2023). However, military programs did not appreciably expand at UNG until World War I with the passage of the National Defense Act of 1916, a piece of federal legislation that created the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) (Adams, Lanford, and Mayernick 2023). Despite this development, the University of North Georgia did not award commissions in the army or army reserves until after World War II. Since then, thousands of commissioned officers in the army have graduated from the University of North Georgia, of whom more than 50 ascended to the rank of general (University of North Georgia n.d.-a).

The University of North Georgia ranks as the sixth largest public institution of higher education in Georgia with an enrollment of just under 20,000 students (University of North Georgia n.d.-a). It offers over 140 associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees that prepare students to serve as leaders in an increasingly diverse and global society (University of North Georgia n.d.-a). UNG has been designated as both The Military College of Georgia and a Leadership Institution (University of North Georgia n.d.-a). As a state-supported institution of higher education, a majority of

UNG students are in-state residents. During the 2022–23 academic year, 657 cadets participated in this “24-hour leadership laboratory,” approximately 100 of whom were commissioned as second lieutenants upon graduation (University of North Georgia n.d.-a). The Corps of Cadets consists of two battalions of three companies each and a headquarters company composed of the Boar’s Head Brigade staff and several special teams (University of North Georgia n.d.-a). All cadets are current undergraduate students who are overseen by a small number of United States Army officers (either active duty or retired) and personnel.

This research is a “what is” project within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Hutchings 2000). Through observations and anecdotal conversations with history faculty at the University of North Georgia, we, as researchers, observed that faculty perceived a difference in the depth in, breadth of, and engagement with history course material among students enrolled in the Corps of Cadets compared to their peers who were not cadets. This aligns with existing findings that military students engage with learning in higher education differently than their non-military peers (Melidona and Wright 2023). We sought to investigate this difference through a qualitative exploratory study which utilized narrative inquiry. This study explores the following two interconnected research questions:

1. How are undergraduate students who are cadets at a United States senior military college drawing on their co-curricular engagement as cadets, and how are they connecting it with their learning and development as history students?
2. How are undergraduate students who are cadets at a United States senior military college drawing on their curricular learning and development as history students, and how are they connecting it with their engagement and development as cadets?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In recent years, the military has served as the largest provider of adult education in the United States (Persyn and Polson 2012). Robust scholarship exists that explores military education among students enrolled at the various United States service academies (Bartone, Snook, and Tremble 2002; Dwyer et al. 2020; Ince and Priest 1998; Katayama, Jordan, and Guerrero 2008; Keith 2010; Keith 2012; Kofoed et al. 2024; Murray et al. 2021; O’Callaghan and Bryant 1990; O’Keefe et al. 2022; O’Keefe, González-Espada, and Meier 2023; Schaefer et al. 2022; Wanish 2000)<sup>2</sup> as well as for students who are cadets in ROTC programs (Belue Buckley et al. 2023; Cassel and Airman 2000; Gilson, Latimer, and Lochbaum 2015; Johnston 2010; Lyons and Masland 2015; Ngaruiya et al. 2014; Raabe et al. 2021; Shannon 2013; Silva 2008). The value of a humanities education in conjunction with participation in ROTC programs has been recognized by elite private universities, including Harvard University (Pazzanese 2016). Yet exceedingly few studies examine either the experiences or the development of students in the Corps of Cadets at a senior military college in the United States. The very few studies that have focused on this population have examined cadets’ conception of the general education writing requirement (Rifenburg and Forester 2018), the ways in which a single cadet understood and processed his own writing development over the four years of college (Rifenburg 2022), as well as cadets’ utilization of specific forms of leadership (Rabstojek 2002). The paucity of such extant research is curious, given that military learners (including cadets) have distinct ways of learning and engaging with higher education compared to their non-military peers (Melidona and Wright 2023). This is attributable to their unique lived experiences as a result of their engagements as officers in training in the military.

Military learning for cadets at the University of North Georgia encompasses rigorous academic and leadership training (University of North Georgia n.d.-b). Beyond attainment of an undergraduate

degree in one of more than 140 majors, all cadets are required to enroll in military science courses, participate in physical fitness training, and engage in cadet-led labs and field training exercises (University of North Georgia n.d.-c). Cadets are encouraged to pursue additional international education and experiences at UNG through such means as the Summer Language Institute (which offers intensive language education in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Russian), as well as culturally-conscious leadership training through Project Global Officer and study abroad (University of North Georgia n.d.-d). Cadets are assigned ever-increasing and more involved leadership responsibilities as they progress from freshman to senior year (University of North Georgia n.d.-b).

According to Galgano (2007), the discipline of history assumes the “place as the keystone of liberal education” (paragraph 1). While some have questioned the value of studying history (Costa 2019), others have highlighted the value of an education in the humanities affords, history in particular (Fitzpatrick and Say 2017; Frank, Chaney, and Thomas 2015; Kent 2012; Stecker-Doxat 2021). For example, benefits from either studying or majoring in history include refined decision-making (Barton 2012), constructive dialogue and debating skills (Osborne 2005), professional development (Fitzpatrick and Say 2017; Stewart, Iran-Nejad, and Robinson 2008), and leadership development (Tabe, Heystik, and Warnick 2021). In the estimation of the Society for History Education, historical thinking requires students:

to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in their textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves; to consult documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, and other evidence from the past, and to do so imaginatively—taking into account the historical context in which these records were created and comparing the multiple points of view of those on the scene at the time. (Society for History Education 1995, 315)

History education is even more impactful when classroom engagement centers on students’ interests and insights (Stewart, Iran-Nejad, and Robinson 2008). Extant studies identify the positive impact an education in history and other humanities disciplines affords to students at military academies around the world (Flammang 2007; Lussier and Denford 2024).

Flammang asserts that American culture, especially through film and television, have reinforced “a belief that military service is incongruous with an appreciation for the arts” (Flammang 2007, 31). Flammang also acknowledges that there is an erroneous myth “that those who value the sciences and engineering do not or cannot also value the arts” (Flammang 2007, 32). Rather, Flammang reminds us that Sylvanus Thayer, a pioneering superintendent of the United States Military Academy in the early nineteenth century, envisioned an institution where character development and engineering education assumed a symbiotic relationship. As a U.S. military officer, professor, and scholar of the humanities, Flammang (2007) argues that military students of the twenty-first century continue to benefit from coursework which exposes them to the arts and humanities. Likewise, Lussier and Denford (2024) highlight the critical importance of role-modeling authentic ethical leadership within the context of specific institutions such as military colleges. Lussier and Denford (2024) also note the importance of leaders who are mindful of the lived experiences of historically marginalized populations, including Indigenous students. Even in recognizing the works of Flammang (2007) and Lussier and Denford (2024), the existing literature on this topic does not examine the intersection of the impact of history education on cadets at a United States senior military college.

Learning both inside and outside the post-secondary classrooms provides an enhanced educational experience and increased learning for students (Tinto 1994). Key among these

experiences outside of the classroom is co-curricular learning (Bergen-Cico and Viscomi 2012). This study defines co-curricular activities as structured events that occur outside of the formal classroom environment that complement the formal education program (Bartkus et al. 2012; Rutter and Mintz 2016). Engagement in co-curricular activities positively impacts college students in the development of various skills (Peck et al. 2016; Peck and Preston 2018). Specific skills acknowledged as frequently developed through co-curricular engagement range from improved interpersonal relationships (Kuh 2009), to critical thinking (Nicoli 2011; Terenzini et al. 1996), to maturity (Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling 1996). Likewise, research confirms that engagement in co-curricular activities correlates with improved academic performance (Bergen-Cico and Viscomi 2012; Singh 2017). Complementing this, engagement in co-curricular activities at the undergraduate level positively impacts a student's self-esteem (Allen 2019). This study refrains from rigidly defining "learning" as there is no consensus definition of this term among scholars (Dandy and Bendersky 2014). However, as researchers, we understand "learning" to be a process whereby students acquire new knowledge, skills, and/or deeper understanding through a combination of experience, study, or instruction.<sup>3</sup> Finally, this study defines development as growth and organization with increasing complexity (Sanford 1967); within the realm of higher education, it pertains to "the development of the whole person" (Rodgers 1990, 27).

## METHODOLOGY

### **Narrative inquiry**

This study utilized narrative inquiry, a methodology that is beneficial for several reasons. First, narrative inquiry fosters an understanding of the lived experiences of the individuals as well as an application for how said individuals make meaning of those particular experiences (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Patton 2002). Second, narrative inquiry centers on a particular period of time in the lives of the study participants (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998). This reality is critical, given that this study examines the experiences of students during a specific point in their lives, namely their undergraduate experience as a student and as a cadet at a senior military college. Third, narrative inquiry promotes a focus on the lived experiences and stories of the study participants (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Storytelling in narrative inquiry "is the primary way we express what we know and who we are" (Kim 2016, 9). Narrative inquiry emphasizes the value of study participants' stories and lived experiences.

### **Participant selection and sample size**

The study targeted a sample of six to ten individuals; a total of six participants enrolled in the study. In our estimation, such a sample size would produce a deep, rich knowledge of the experience (Beitin 2012; Kim 2016). At the same time, we recognized the limited number of students who would fit the selection criteria for the study. We required study participants to be current students at the University of North Georgia who had both declared a major in history and who were active members of the Corps of Cadets. Even with the selected sample size in mind, we collected data to the point of obtaining data saturation. Data saturation occurs at the point during data collection when no new themes or insights emerge upon collection of additional data (Charmaz 2006). Prior to engaging in recruitment and data collection, we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of North Georgia IRB.

### **Data collection**

We recruited study participants via email communication. We sent an initial email to all currently declared history majors at the institution. The email briefly introduced the study as well as

identified study requirements. Interested individuals emailed us to schedule a mutually convenient time for both researchers to interview the study participant. We required that study participants complete a short questionnaire designed to collect demographic data prior to the interview. Each participant engaged in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview with both researchers. We developed questions for the semi-structured interview protocol after conversations with current history faculty at UNG, researchers with expertise on co-curricular learning in post-secondary environments, and recently retired senior officers in the United States Army. Narrative inquiry studies, including this one, value in-depth interviews; these should elicit a rich collection of data and stories (Johnson and Christensen 2014). We audio recorded all interviews and had the interviews transcribed; transcription of the interviews facilitated analysis by the researchers. Upon receipt of the transcribed interviews, we performed member checking whereby participants confirmed the accuracy of their expressed sentiments. To maintain confidentiality, we employed pseudonyms for all research participants. Table 1 captures basic biographical information about the six study participants.

Table 1. Study Participants

| Participant pseudonym | Hometown   | Anticipated graduation date | Academic minor              |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Logan                 | Fairfax, VA                                      | May 2023                    | Military science/leadership |
| Smalls                | Self-identified "military brat" with no hometown | May 2023                    | Military science/leadership |
| Jay                   | Canton, GA                                       | May 2023                    | Military science/leadership |
| James                 | Lawrenceville, GA                                | May 2024                    | Economics                   |
| Derek                 | Fayetteville, GA                                 | May 2024                    | German                      |
| Maxwell               | LaGrange, GA                                     | May 2026                    | Military science/leadership |

Note: Despite efforts made by the researchers to recruit participants with a wide range of demographic identities, all study participants self-identified as male. Given this, we intentionally use their self-identified pronouns in this work.

### Data trustworthiness and analysis

After completion of member checking each transcript, we commenced analysis and coding. In the initial round of coding, both researchers independently completed open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) of each transcript. Open coding is a form of analysis where researchers go about "naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the data" (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 62). Next, a second round of coding, performed collectively by both researchers, facilitated the identification of emerging themes; we achieved this by grouping initial codes that were thematically similar to one another (Saldaña 2016). Throughout the analysis, we looked for and identified a variety of common narratives and themes from the study participant interviews. In-depth axial coding of these themes, which is useful in making connections between a theme and its various subthemes (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 97) followed this second round of coding to complete the analysis. Throughout the analysis, we engaged in peer debriefing, which can enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Connelly 2016; Spall 1998). This multi-stepped analytical process facilitated the emergence of the various themes across the study participants while simultaneously providing

structure for the research and minimizing any preconceived biases held by the researchers before the study commenced. All of these steps align with established practices to increase trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Krefting 1991).

### **Researcher reflexivity**

As scholars, we acknowledge that research conducted by multiple researchers is a form of reflexivity (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). Neither scholar currently is or has ever been an active member of the United States armed forces. One scholar had familial ties to the military, specifically a father who served in the United States Navy for 20 years and was later an employee at the Department of Defense for an additional 22 years. Both scholars have educational experience and expertise in the field of history; one obtained a bachelor's degree in history and the other earned bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in history. One researcher is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Georgia and has taught nearly 250 members of the Corps of Cadets over the past five academic years. No participant in the study was currently enrolled in a class of either researcher, though three participants were former students.

### **FINDINGS AND NARRATIVES**

This study revealed that a strong symbiosis, a close, interdependent relationship between two or more individuals, groups, or experiences, exists between student success in the Corps of Cadets (their shared co-curricular engagement) and student success in history classes (their shared curricular experience). Alternately, student success in the Corps of Cadets engendered student success in history classes and vice versa. This symbiotic relationship is succinctly underscored by Derek:

They [the identity as a member of the Corps of Cadets and the identity as a history major] blur a lot . . . You're never one or the other. You're always both. [I'm] not just a history major when I'm in a history class or doing homework or a cadet when I'm off in cadet land doing cadet stuff. I'm both.

Within this broader metanarrative, four distinctive narratives emerged across the study participants. A majority, if not all, participants identified each of these four narratives in their interviews.. These four narratives include: 1) academic growth, 2) personal growth, 3) professional growth, and 4) recognition of value.

### **Academic growth**

Participants identified several ways in which skills gained and/or honed in history classes contributed to their continuous development as members of the Corps of Cadets. These skills varied from knowledge of proper citations to critical thinking. For example, Logan recalled:

The importance of citations and the difficulty of separating opinion from fact and making a logically cohesive argument as much as you may or may not like the results. And the importance of what you don't know, and the ability to just say, "I don't know," instead of trying to make something up.

Similarly, James shared that he can now "sit down and research and learn and understand more and appreciate more." A second semester senior, James traced his significant academic growth; he acknowledged that he did not possess research, critical thinking, and analysis skills when he was a

college freshman or in high school. James recalled that while he developed an interest in history at a young age, years before his enrollment at UNG, it was only “until pretty much last semester” that he had “been able to really buckle down, take topics that [he was] really interested in and study them in depth, learn them in the ways that [he] want[ed] to, with research papers and stuff like that.”

Beyond critical thinking and deep analysis, participants identified that they sharpened other crucial skills, particularly time management, while enrolled in history classes. Maxwell recalled:

Just had to stay on top of everything at the time and just try to keep all of it afloat at the same time. Try to spread out what I’m working on. I can’t devote all of my time to one project. I’ve got to work on four different ones at the same time and managing everything that I’ve got going at the same time and still finding a place for me to go and do what I enjoy.

Collectively, these participants revealed that their academic development in history classes has reinforced their development as members of the Corps. For some, this will complement the development of skills required to be an effective officer in the United States Army.

### **Personal growth**

In addition to their development and growth academically, multiple study participants articulated growth on a personal level. Maxwell noted that “[Being a history major and being a member of the Corps of Cadets] made me more well-rounded for sure.” Reflecting on his personal growth, Derek highlighted a range of characteristics that he had further developed through both his co-curricular experience and curricular learning, including:

Heck of a lot more physical stuff, strategic thinking, quick thinking, and quick strategizing . . . I’ve definitely gotten stronger. Okay. I’ve been more physically active and am interacting with a heck of a lot more people. I’ve become slightly more social than I was beforehand. And I’ve definitely grown in my confidence.

Logan corroborated Derek’s thoughts on personal growth and development. In particular, Logan noted that:

So it [being a history major in the Corps of Cadets] opened me a lot to, I guess for lack of a better term, human nature. How people behave in organizations, how these organizations behave or how they work and the importance of good leadership. And the importance of taking risks, encouraging the risk environment, and the proper function of discomfort, how you should respond to that, or when it should be given.

While the nuances of the particular areas of personal growth differed in each participant, many of the study subjects were able to articulate multiple areas of personal growth and development that occurred through their engagement in various history courses as well as their experiences as members in the Corps of Cadets.

### **Professional growth**

Participants highlighted how both curricular engagement through history courses and co-curricular engagement as part of the Corps of Cadets worked symbiotically to engender their

professional growth and development. Connecting the importance of his history coursework to his development as a future army officer, Jay reflected:

My desire is more for the soldiers that I'll be in charge of and helping them understand things that I've learned [as a history major] so that they're better informed and that they can make better decisions . . . I think all leaders, all cadets need some basis of history to better understand the world that they're going into, the world that some of their soldiers are coming from. Because, especially as more fortunate, more intellectual college kids, they don't have that. They're [the officers] not used to sometimes being homeless. Not all of them are. Not all of them are used to going hungry. Not all of them are used to facing failure after failure after failure. But the soldiers, they're about to go lead [have faced these things].

Jay drew connections between the deeper understanding and perspective he gained from history coursework with his standing in the Corps of Cadets. Experiences from both would simultaneously inform and enhance the ways in which he would interact with the soldiers who would be under his command upon his commission as an army officer.

Smalls identified concrete ways in which his curricular and co-curricular experiences at UNG impacted his professional growth. Highlighting specific ways he had developed professionally through these experiences, Smalls proclaimed:

I would say a sense of maturity. The idea that I have to make decisions on my own and maybe for other people. And then time management has become a huge one because of how many things I have going on during the day, which isn't a whole lot, however, it does require time. And then personal accountability. I started just looking at every decision that I make and started thinking of how to improve.

While the specific nature of the symbiotic professional development that occurred for each cadet differed slightly, they frequently articulated the ways in which their curricular endeavors as history students and their co-curricular experiences in the Corps of Cadets worked together to further their professional development.

### **Recognition of value**

Participants universally recognized the value that successful completion of coursework in history brought to their lives as future leaders and informed citizens. Regarding the former, participants identified ways in which a deeper, multifaceted study of American and world history classes gave them perspective, empathy, and comparative analysis. For example, James felt confident that he would be a more effective leader after his exposure to history. James shared that he is “a big believer that understanding and knowing history is very, very necessary in being a productive and knowledgeable member of society as someone who can go forward and develop people.” James expanded upon this observation in his assertion that “to be an educated citizen, who has voting rights, it's very important to understand a lot of the things that are happening are not new and [that there is] pattern recognition based on that.” Specific to James' comment regarding the ways in which history can help to “develop people,” he recognizes the value of an education in history beyond his own academic, personal, and professional growth. For James, history is a tool he may employ in order



to facilitate the growth and development of people that he works for or with as well as those who work under him.

Jay corroborated James; however, Jay specifically cited the omnipresent place comparative analysis played in the history classroom and how his ability to process phenomena—historical or otherwise—through many lenses would be invaluable in his career. Drawing parallels to the Cold War when the United States intervened in Guatemala in 1954 and removed its elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, on the premise that he was too soft on communism, Jay cogently opined that students of history internalize that they may not always idealize the United States, including its military record, but must strive for more objectivity and seek competing views and explanations for any phenomena:

I think the multiple perspective has probably been the biggest thing. Also not looking at America through rose-tinted glasses, but understanding that we're just as broken as all the other countries. For example, the U.S. intervention in Guatemala, we overthrew a democracy and installed a dictator because we can control them better, while fighting for "freedom." We tend to glorify America as Americans, but understanding that we've done some dark, dirty stuff that's just not talked about, I think it's real important because that also feeds back into better understanding of how you look at elections and stuff like that. Don't get blown off course to one side or the other when it comes to politics because both sides are dark. There's a lot more to it than red versus blue."

Complementing the ways in which history coursework added value to their lives as people, citizens, professionals, and leaders, participants recognized the value that participation in the Corps of Cadets brought to these various facets. According to the study participants, the Corps operated as a community through which cadets forged an identity and culture, reinforced their sense of belonging, and developed maturity; these all contributed to the development of confident and responsible leaders.

Smalls conceded that life in the Corps of Cadets was rigorous and time-consuming, but—as a second-semester senior—he recognized all that it had brought to him:

It actually means a lot for me. Everyone looks back on their college years as finding out. And I don't see this as a bad time. As much as I had more responsibilities and it took up a lot of time, parades and stupid stuff like that, I enjoyed it and I really value it because I matured as a person. And I'll see my friends back home and interacting with them, I want to say isn't the same, but I feel like I'm on a higher sense of maturity because at the end of the day, I'm going to have to go in front of people my age and act like the dad or mom.

Young adults often do not appreciate or recognize value from life experiences in their youth until they are older and can put those past personal experiences into perspective (Munawar, Kuhn, and Haque 2018). Significantly, the participants of this study acknowledged the value of their reinforcing experiences as history majors and members of the Corps of Cadets before graduation.

## DISCUSSION

This study makes three contributions to preexisting SoTL literature:

First, this study buttresses the existing literature that highlights the value and positive impact students obtain from majoring in history (Barton 2012; Fitzpatrick and Say 2017; Osborne 2005;

Stewart, Iran-Nejad, and Robinson 2008; Tabe, Heystek, and Warnick 2021). The recognition of this value by the study participants is particularly salient within this study. Cadets articulated the value-added knowledge, insights, and skills developed through their curricular experiences as a history major. The development of such skills, knowledge, and insights is likely invaluable for these cadets as they actively transition to serving as future commissioned officers in the military and in other capacities once their tenure as an officer cadet comes to a close.

Second, findings from this research support the existing literature that identifies the positive impact of curricular and co-curricular learning in the development of college students (Bergen-Cico and Viscomi 2012; Kuh 2009; Nicoli 2011; Singh 2017; Terenzini et al. 1996; Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling 1996). Our study adds to this body of literature by identifying a symbiotic relationship between curricular and co-curricular learning among this particular student population. Much of the extant literature focuses heavily on how the co-curricular positively impacts curricular studies. Our study supports this preexisting scholarship, yet it underscores that the relationship between curricular and co-curricular learning is not a one-way street. Instead, it is truly symbiotic; we recognize that the curricular positively impacts the co-curricular for cadets and vice versa. The growth along multiple dimensions (namely academic, personal, and professional) illustrates the powerful impact on students through this symbiotic engagement and understanding between the curricular and co-curricular.

Lastly, this research addresses the relative void in the literature regarding United States senior military colleges and their value-added impact in educating officer cadets. As previously acknowledged, limited literature examines cadets at a senior military college in any capacity (Rabstajnek 2002; Rifenburg and Forester 2018, Rifenburg 2022). At this time, it does not appear that any literature studies the development of cadets at a senior military college with regard to the impact of both curricular and co-curricular engagements. Similarly, we are unaware of any existing literature that explores the implications of cadets majoring in history at a senior military college. Scholars have recognized that students affiliated with the military—in some capacity—engage with higher education differently than do their non-military peers (Melidona and Wright 2023). As such, our study contributes to this scholarship via an exploration of the unique impact of curricular and co-curricular engagements on cadets at a senior military college who are majoring in history. We anticipate that this study will spur scholars, student affairs practitioners, and officers alike to acknowledge and further study these unique military education institutions.

### **Implications for research and practice**

As articulated in the discussion, for students in the Corps of Cadets at a senior military college, a major in history engenders multi-faceted, symbiotic growth. Hopefully this study's findings will encourage further meaningful engagement between academic affairs and student affairs, specifically a partnership that will facilitate connections between curricular and co-curricular education. Additionally, there exists opportunities to continue exploring these connections through research that builds onto the findings of this initial exploratory study.

Similarly, this study has direct implications for faculty and staff within the discipline of history. In particular, such individuals may think more consciously and directly about conveying the value-added competencies and learning gained through a major in history. For example, history faculty and academic advisors may work together to highlight this symbiotic relationship between curricular and co-curricular learning to cadets enrolled at a senior military college. Such a relationship would also be applicable to individuals at institutions around the world tasked with educating future members of

the military. This collaboration would be appropriate at new student orientations, first-year student seminars, major fairs, and career fairs.

We acknowledge that the skills gained or honed by those enrolled in history classes is typically present in other humanities disciplines, for example, English and philosophy. Like history, these other disciplines immeasurably contribute to the “character building” of military personnel (Flammang 2007, 32) by providing a foundation upon which to make ethical decisions. They likewise hone such vital skills as critical thinking and problem solving, all the while encouraging the processing of human phenomena through diverse and multi-faceted lenses (Pazzanese 2016). This study encourages a dialogue among faculty and staff with professional and research ties to a myriad of humanities disciplines. Such a collective dialogue would foster an opportunity to study this symbiotic relationship between curricular and co-curricular learning with more breadth and depth, while making our exploratory findings applicable to a wider audience.

Opportunities remain to explore this relationship further. Perhaps most significantly, researchers should seek to determine the threshold needed for this development to occur symbiotically. For example, is a major in history required for academic, personal, and professional development to occur, or is it possible to achieve all of these developments through a minor in history? Is merely a single general education course in history sufficient to facilitate this development? Perhaps no precise threshold exists; for example, some might reach a similar level of development through only a minor in history, while others require the complete experience of a major.

This study, while narrow in scope, initiates a broader discussion around the relationship between curricular and co-curricular learning. Specifically, future research may want to explore the ways in which engagement in other curricular topics and/or other co-curricular opportunities further impact student development. Determining whether the symbiotic nature is similar across different mixes of curricular and co-curricular activities in the development of cadets would potentially benefit faculty, staff, and officers in training future military personnel in their combined efforts to educate and develop these particular students.

As with any research study, limitations always exist. First, this study pertained to students at a single senior military college. Students enrolled at one of the other five senior military colleges in the United States, for example, may have different experiences. Consequently, additional research must determine the extent to which the findings among cadets at the University of North Georgia are applicable to those at other senior military colleges. Second, this study is cross-sectional in design. This reality limits the data to information found at a specific moment in time. Additional studies that are longitudinal would allow for: 1) the examination of symbiotic growth across the arc of the undergraduate college experience for cadets, and 2) an exploration to determine whether differences in the development of students exist among those with different long-term career goals. Alternatively, do students who are planning to commission and serve full-time as an officer develop differently from those students whose future goal includes serving in the national guard or from those students who have no intention of pursuing a career tied to military service after graduating? Third, this study is composed of individuals who self-identify as male. As such, those who identify as nonbinary or female could have divergent experiences regarding the symbiotic relationship between their history curricular studies and their co-curricular experiences as cadets. Given the homogenous nature of the cadets who elected to participate in this study, caution should be utilized in applying the findings from this study until future research confirms that these findings are shared among more heterogeneous populations. Fourth, the sample size for this study is relatively small in light of the various inclusion/exclusion criteria for the study participants. We are confident that data saturation occurred; however, conducting additional studies with a larger population would address these

potential limitations and concerns regarding the research. Lastly, we recognize that the population studied likely holds existing biases towards the United States military. Readers should be mindful of this context in examining the findings of this study as they consider the applicability of the findings and implications for their own cultural and institutional context.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the ways in which students who are majoring in history and members of the Corps of Cadets at a senior military college in the United States connect their curricular learning in history courses with their co-curricular engagement as cadets. These findings articulate the depth and breadth of development that occurs for cadets through these interactions. Furthermore, this study addresses two voids in the literature: 1) the experiences of students at United States senior military colleges and 2) the ways in which curricular and co-curricular success symbiotically reinforce one another.

Upon consideration of the full transcripts for all six study participants, we perceive that a major in history provides a number of academic, professional, and personal benefits to cadets who plan to pursue a career in the military or an adjacent field. In addition to the narratives conveyed by the participants, we recognize additional points of interest. While the participants did not explicitly express these points, we extrapolate that a major in history fosters: 1) a “real world” skillset, particularly one that underscores critical thinking and communication skills over mere content, 2) empathy, particularly the ability to relate to others across race, class, gender, and cultural backgrounds, and 3) development of nuance, particularly the ability to assess phenomena—historical or otherwise—from multiple perspectives, all while incorporating material across diverse disciplines. These three extrapolated points contribute to the scant literature (Flammang 2007; Lussier and Denford 2024) that identifies the value of an education grounded in the humanities for those preparing for a military career.

These findings hold much value for a range of individuals at United States senior military colleges. They are not only beneficial for the students themselves but also for faculty (particularly history faculty), student affairs practitioners, and officers overseeing the cadets. Furthermore, these findings have applicability to other postsecondary institutions tasked with the training of military personnel. Meaningful, concerted engagement between all parties who contribute to the development and refinement of cadets as future military officers will provide even more intentional opportunities to foster symbiotic growth for cadets academically, personally, and professionally. It is imperative that such personnel work collaboratively to convey the value that the study of history affords for students whose professional goal is to become a military officer.

## NOTES

1. The United States has designated six postsecondary schools as senior military colleges (The Citadel, Norwich University, Texas Agricultural & Mechanical University (Texas A&M), University of North Georgia (UNG), Virginia Military Institute (VMI), and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech)). These institutions offer Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs under Title 10 of the United States Code.
2. The United States currently has five service academies (the United States Military Academy, the United States Naval Academy, the United States Air Force Academy, the United States Coast Guard Academy, and the United States Merchant Marine Academy). The United States service academies are federal institutions of higher education that focus on the

undergraduate education and training of (future) commissioned officers. They are under purview of Title 10 of the United States Code.

3. Our definition aligns with one of the more recent attempts to operationalize “learning” (Myrah and Sutherland 2019).

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