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Current Military Academy Service Obligation: Good for Civil-Military Relations

George Fust | 05 August 2019

Imagine receiving a free undergraduate education at one of the best colleges in the United States. The military academies provide this. Any economist, however, will tell you that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The American tax payer foots the bill for all those who are admitted to attend one of the military's academies. In exchange, these citizens will commission as officers and serve an obligation of five years on active duty. The most recent [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (NDAA) includes a section directing the Secretary of Defense to assess if this five-year service obligation should be extended. Congress is now questioning if the increase in the cost of educating and training should equate to an increase in time served for graduates. In short, is the nation getting "an adequate return on investment for a service academy graduate?"

The intuitive answer to this question is no. The cost for a single person to graduate from an academy according to a 2003 Government Accountability Office (GAO) [Report](#) is estimated between \$275,000-\$350,000. This is factored by dividing an academy's operating expenses by its total number of cadets. Sure, the academies can argue they do more than commission cadets, however, their primary function is exactly this. Even on the low end, the cost estimate, which is also dated, is a significant investment on the part of the taxpayer. As the NDAA points out, the cost to train one graduate has risen 20% since the 5-year obligation was implemented 20 years ago. Thus, it makes sense that those who volunteer to attend a service academy should serve a longer minimum obligation to keep pace with the benefit they receive.

Before amending the existing legislation, Congress wants to know the impacts that would result from raising the minimum service obligation. For example, how would it affect recruiting for the academies? Could the academies offer incentives or preferential admissions? While valid, these questions miss a crucial point of view. The plan to raise the minimum service obligation should not be a foregone conclusion. An understanding of the civil-military implications associated with this decision must be given the same weight, if not more, than the dollar cost.

The U.S. military academies all include values-based language in their mission statements. The [Army](#), [Air Force](#), and [Coast Guard](#) strive to develop "leaders of character." The [Navy](#) seeks to develop those with the "highest ideals of duty, honor and loyalty." This is the core of what these institutions do. An intangible outcome that is difficult to put a price on. While other institutions pay lip service to providing an ethical underpinning, only the academies make it a central characteristic. Increasing the minimum service obligation for academy graduates would reduce the influx into society of those imbued with these beliefs. Evidence of the benefit of "the nation's premier leadership schools" is chronicled in numerous books. A recent example, [West Point Leadership: Profiles of Courage](#), "shows how West Point graduates have become business leaders that ran the railroads before the Civil War to CEOs of some of today's biggest and most prestigious companies." The nation benefits from the investment it makes in developing leaders of character.

Healthy civil-military relations include a military that shares a similar composition to society. Increasing the minimum service obligation will reduce the turn-over rate currently in practice. Over the long-term this could result in the evolution of the military into a Pretorian guard. An army composed of members who view themselves as soldiers first and citizens second is an

existential threat to any government. A soldier's loyalty must always be to the state first. An extension of the service obligation will result in a greater number of officers electing to make the Army a career through retirement, rather than as a service opportunity before rejoining society as a citizen. On the extreme end, examples such as Cameroon or Mexico can highlight the potential civil-military dangers of having long initial service obligations.

Another serious concern to a service extension is the negative impact it will have on recruiting for the academies. Many highly competitive candidates select alternate undergraduate experiences with the rationale that 5 years is already too long a commitment. Can we expect an 18-year-old to make a rational decision that commits them to more than the already established 9 years (four at the academy and 5 on active duty)? Even if the extension was only a year or two, the answer to this question will quickly reveal itself in the form of a reduction in applications.

What is the solution to Congress' request? A primary consideration for any changes must include the long-term civil-military implications. At present, the 5-year active duty obligation provides a healthy balance between repaying the American taxpayer and contributing to society. The Academies produce more than military officers, they produce leaders for the nation. Perhaps, the academies should increase the size of graduating classes without requiring any obligation for a certain percentage. Application rates would sky rocket and the nation's long-term health would improve. The taxpayer would receive an immediate return on its investment in leadership and character. The civil-military gap would also likely close when society has a greater influx of young leaders inculcated with an understanding of military culture and values.

The current cost to train and educate a single officer at one of the nation's military academies is negligible when you consider the far-reaching impact these graduates have. They have helped win world wars, they have nursed major companies back to health, and two of them are [slated to serve](#) as the Secretary of State and Defense during a time of international turmoil. Academy graduates are a cheap insurance policy for the nation. They maintain the core values of the republic and it is critical they be allowed to choose citizenship over military service to maintain the strength of our civil-military relations.