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The Academies' March Toward Mediocrity

By BRUCE FLEMING

Annapolis, Md.

THE idea of a football star receiving lenient treatment after testing positive for drug use would raise no eyebrows at most colleges. But the United States Naval Academy “holds itself to a higher standard,” as its administrators are fond of saying. According to policy set by the chief of naval operations, Adm. Gary Roughead, himself a former commandant of midshipmen at the academy, we have a “zero tolerance” policy for drug use.

Yet, according to Navy Times, [a running back was allowed to remain at Annapolis this term](#) because the administration accepted his claim that he smoked a cigar that he didn't know contained marijuana. (He was later kicked off the team for a different infraction, and has now left the academy.)

The incident brings to light an unpleasant truth: the Naval Academy, where I have been a professor for 23 years, has lost its way. The same is true of the other service academies. They are a net loss to the taxpayers who finance them, as well as a huge disappointment to their students, who come expecting reality to match reputation. They need to be fixed or abolished.

The service academies are holdovers from the 19th century, when they were virtually the only avenue for producing an officer corps for the nation's military and when such top-down institutions were taken for granted. But the world has changed, which the academies don't seem to have noticed, or to have drawn any conclusions from.

With the rise after World War II of the Reserve Officer Training Corps programs at universities

around the country, the academies now produce 20 percent or less of the officers in each service, at an average cost to taxpayers of nearly half a million dollars per student, more than four times what an R.O.T.C.-trained officer costs.

The institutions are set on doing things their own way, yet I know of nobody in the Navy or other services who would argue that graduates of Annapolis or West Point are, as a group, better than those who become officers through other programs. A student can go to a civilian school like Vanderbilt, major in art history (which we don't offer), have the usual college social experience and nightlife (which we forbid), be commissioned through R.O.T.C. — and apparently be just as good an officer as a Naval Academy product.

Instead of better officers, the academies produce burned-out midshipmen and cadets. They come to us thinking they've entered a military Camelot, and find a maze of petty rules with no visible future application. These rules are applied inconsistently by the administration, and tend to change when a new superintendent is appointed every few years. The students quickly see through assurances that "people die if you do X" (like, "leave mold on your shower curtain," a favorite claim of one recent administrator). We're a military Disneyland, beloved by tourists but disillusioning to the young people who came hoping to make a difference.

In my experience, the students who find this most demoralizing are those who have already served as Marines and sailors (usually more than 5 percent of each incoming class), who know how the fleet works and realize that what we do on the military-training side of things is largely make-work. Academics, too, are compromised by the huge time commitment these exercises require. Yes, we still produce some Rhodes, Marshall and Truman Scholars. But mediocrity is the norm.

Meanwhile, the academy's former pursuit of excellence seems to have been pushed aside by the all-consuming desire to beat Notre Dame at football (as Navy did last year). To keep our teams in the top divisions of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, we fill officer-candidate slots with students who have been recruited primarily for their skills at big-time sports. That means we reject candidates with much higher predictors of military success (and, yes, athletic skills that are more pertinent to military service) in favor of players who, according to many midshipmen who speak candidly to me, often have little commitment to the military itself.

It's no surprise that recruited athletes have been at the center of recent scandals, including a linebacker who was convicted of indecent assault on a female midshipman in 2007 and a

quarterback who was accused of rape and dismissed from the academy for sexual misconduct in 2006. Sports stars are flattered on campus, avoid many of the onerous duties other midshipmen must perform, and know they're not going to be thrown out. Instead of zero tolerance, we now push for zero attrition: we "remediate" honor code offenses.

Another program that is placing strain on the academies is an unofficial affirmative-action preference in admissions. While we can debate the merits of universities making diversity a priority in deciding which students to admit, how can one defend the use of race as a factor at taxpayer-financed academies — especially those whose purpose is to defend the Constitution? Yet, as I can confirm from the years I spent on the admissions board in 2002 and '03 and from my conversations with more recent board members, if an applicant identifies himself or herself as non-white, the bar for qualification immediately drops.

Some in the administration have justified the admissions policies on the ground that it "takes all kinds" to be officers. But that's not really what the academies recruit. They don't give preference to accomplished cellists or people from religious minorities or cerebral Zen types.

We've even given less-qualified students a backdoor into Annapolis — the [Naval Academy Preparatory School](#), our remedial institution in Newport, R.I., for admitted students who are not prepared to enter the academy itself. And if students struggle academically when they get to the academy, our goal is to get them to graduate at whatever cost. Thus we now offer plenty of low-track and remedial courses, and students who fail can often just retake classes until they pass: we have control over their summers and their schedules, and can simply drag them through with tutoring.

I've taught low-track English classes; the pace is slower and the papers shorter than in my usual seminars, but the students who complete them get the same credit. When I've complained about this, some administrators and midshipmen have argued that academics are irrelevant to being an officer, anyway. Really? Thinking and articulating are irrelevant to being an officer?

The picture I have drawn of the academy is not what most Americans imagine when they come to a parade and see all those clean-cut young men and women standing in nice rows with their chests out (as they will at next week's graduation ceremony). Some may argue that our abandonment of merit as a criterion for officer status is simply the direction the military overall has taken — the stress of fighting two wars has lowered the bar for enlistment, and R.O.T.C. standards have also declined. But I'd like to think we could do better.

We have two choices. One is to shut down Annapolis, West Point and the other academies, and to rely on R.O.T.C. to provide officers. Or we can embrace the level of excellence we once had and have largely abandoned. This means a single set of high standards for all students in admissions, discipline and academics. If that means downgrading our football team to Division III, so be it.

We also need a renaissance in our culture. We need to get our students on board with the program by explaining our goals and asking for feedback from cadets, graduates and the armed forces at large. Now, we're just frustrating the students and misleading taxpayers.

Change won't happen from within. The short-term academy administrations want to keep the hype flowing, and tend to lack the big-picture thinking necessary to seeing the institution objectively. Rather, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and other civilians need to mount a full re-conception of the academies: deciding what do we do that's wrong, what's irrelevant and what deserves to be saved. Otherwise, my most promising students will continue to tell me, "Sir, this place shows you what not to do."

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