

GOOD PROBLEMS: HOW EXCELLENCE IN EXECUTION LEADS TO GREATER OPERATIONAL DIFFICULTY

Darin Gerdes
Charleston Southern University

Lieutenant Colonel Alexandria Watson is the commander of the Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps (AFROTC) Detachment 772 at Charleston Southern University. She took over an anemic detachment, and she has grown the corps of cadets nearly six-fold in two years. By all measures, she has been very successful, but new challenges have sprung from her success.

Watson has assembled a team, gained support from the university and the Air Force for an expanded program, and managed her way to phenomenal growth, but success has led to new problems related to coordination, staffing, and overcrowding.

The case that follows demonstrates how effective execution helped Lt Col Watson and her team achieve these results and it allows students the opportunity to consider what she and her staff must do to manage their newfound success.

INTRODUCTION

“Something has to change,” Lt Col Alexandria Watson thought to herself. “What we are doing is unsustainable.” It was late August of 2017 and Lt Col Watson was beginning her last year as the Detachment commander of the Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps at Charleston Southern University.

This would be Watson’s last assignment before leaving the Air Force. With just nine months to go, she was re-evaluating her effectiveness as Detachment Commander. By all measures, Watson and her team had done remarkably well, but now they had inadvertently created a whole new set of problems that needed to be addressed if they were going to take their detachment to the next level.

Watson was no novice. As a young lieutenant, she spent her first few years in the Air Force as a recruiter. As a captain, Watson became an assistant professor of Aerospace Studies in the AFROTC program at the University of South Carolina from 1999-2002. After assignments as the Inspector General for Joint Base

Charleston, and advisor to the Afghan Air Force Inspector General in Kabul, she returned to Charleston to take command of Detachment 772, the AFROTC program at Charleston Southern University.

GROUNDWORK

When Lt Col Watson arrived on campus in 2014, the detachment was small. It had always been small. It was positioned to remain small. Of the Air Force's 145 AFROTC detachments, it was just one of two 2-year AFROTC programs in the nation.

Forty years ago, the Air Force planned to cut Detachment 772, but Senator Strom Thurmond intervened and a compromise was reached. The detachment could continue, but only as a 2-year detachment. When Watson took command, the detachment only had nine cadets. As a 2-year program, they could only enroll juniors and seniors, they could not compete for the same number of scholarships, and they were staffed at half-strength. They needed resources in order to grow, but to acquire those resources, they had to be larger. It was a catch-22.

WORKING THE SYSTEM

Sequestration in 2013 and force shaping (the military's term for reduction in force) in 2014 made additional resources improbable, but when Watson's boss, Colonel Carriker, asked whether she would be interested in transitioning to a 4-year program, she went to work designing a plan that was slated to take effect in 2017-2018. After the plan was approved, Lt Col Watson obtained permission to accelerate the plan, and they implemented it during the 2016-2017 school year.

This was good news and bad news. To support a 4-year program, they needed three officers and two enlisted instructors (known in the Air Force as cadre). At the time, they only had two officers and one enlisted cadre. The Air Force was having a difficult time filling ROTC slots, so they opened applications to reservists and guardsmen.

Major Kimberly Champagne came aboard in January of 2016. As a reservist herself, Champagne knew how to get other reservists activated, and they soon filled the second enlisted slot. At full strength, they got to the hard work of growing the program.

Charleston Southern University is less than 17 miles from the Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina. The Citadel has earned a certain prestige as Citadel graduates have served prominently since the Civil War. Alumni range from Brigadier General Johnson Haygood, the commander of the Confederate forces in Charleston to General William Westmoreland, the commander of US forces in

Vietnam, to Lieutenant General Beaudette, the current commanding general of the United States Army Special Operations Command.

In contrast, Charleston Southern University is a small Baptist school that recently celebrated its 50th year in operation. For those who aspire to a military career, Charleston Southern was an unlikely choice.

NETWORKING

In May of 2016, Lt Col Watson met with her team to discuss her vision for the detachment. The goal was to have 40 cadets. This included 35 new cadets and five returning cadets. That was a tall order because at the time, they only had nine cadets (only five of which were returning). Cadets in the AFROTC program met for classes on the campus of Charleston Southern University, but the program could also draw students from the College of Charleston, the Medical University of South Carolina, and Trident Tech, the local junior college. At this time, however, they were all CSU students or prior service members connected through Joint Base Charleston.

Converting to a 4-year program provided new avenues for recruitment. Maj Champagne made the rounds at local high schools. This approach would not have been useful for a 2-year program that only admitted juniors and seniors, but as a 4-year program, this rich avenue of recruitment was available. A number of area public schools had Air Force Junior ROTC programs, and the 4-year option appealed to some of these students as an alternative to enlistment.

The cadre was intentional about building bridges with the staff at CSU. While many university administrations have strained relationships with their ROTC programs, Lt Col Watson's team was embraced because of the way that they deliberately sought to integrate into the university. They met with University Relations to create a press release that announced the expansion to a 4-year program and they sent an email blast to prospective students, announcing the new opportunity. The University Relations office helped the cadre with a media blitz, revamped the AFROTC website, and provided marketing tools.

Maj Champagne, a seasoned recruiter, met with the admissions office to let them know what the Air Force could offer to incoming students. She attended recruitment events on campus such as *First Look*, a campus visit program for potential students. She taught the admissions office about the types of scholarships that the Air Force could provide, and she was available on registration day too.

Before long, college recruiters from the admissions office were coming to her saying, "We've got a student interested in ROTC. Can you talk to him?" In the

process, the cadre and admissions staff developed a symbiotic relationship. Students who came to CSU because of the ROTC program helped college recruiters do their jobs more effectively. The cadre made a great deal of progress by demonstrating their value, rather than asking for favors. Then they duplicated these efforts elsewhere.

For example, the cadre entered into partnerships with the veteran services office at the College of Charleston (CofC) and made inroads with the computer science departments at both CofC and CSU. They attended school fairs and made themselves a resource to admissions officers at both schools.

Then they repeated this approach at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) and Trident Tech. Trident Tech was not a rich source of recruits when the detachment was only a 2-year program, but now that the detachment was a 4-year program, students at the junior college were quite valuable. Trident Tech students could compete for ROTC scholarships, and students could transfer to Charleston Southern University seamlessly in order to complete their degrees.

They also worked with the registrar to smooth the path for students at other institutions. As Maj Champagne explained, “The registrar is a huge part of all of this because they have to create a way to admit students in the system so grades can be reported. Amanda Sisson—I can’t say enough about her—she really sealed the deal with our cross-town arrangement because she could speak university-ese...It was taking us almost a year to get a cross-town arrangement off the ground, but in one phone conversation between Amanda Sisson and Trident’s vice-president, it worked. They were very much a part of the success of this program.”

The cadre were pleased by the arrangement because it smoothed the path for new potential cadets. CSU administrators were pleased because Trident Tech students were more likely to transfer to CSU when they graduated from Trident Tech. Trident Tech Administrators were pleased because they could directly recruit JROTC students in an effort to meet their enrollment goals. Everyone was happy with the new arrangement.

COWORKERS

Lt Col Watson and Maj Champagne walked the campus, talking to the faculty and staff to increase their visibility. As professors of Aerospace Studies, they spoke with the professors who advised their cadets to ensure that they understood the ROTC academic plan. ROTC cadets earn a minor in Aerospace Studies. Because they were not competing with the academic majors, professors did not view ROTC as competition but as a complement to their students’ academic plans. Because the cadre were so invested in the lives of their cadets, professors began to view the

cadre as academic support staff who were effective at dealing with cadets who were out of line or falling behind.

Cadets were also highly visible in uniform during their leadership lab in the courtyard (See Exhibit 1). As the number of students increased, students became active agents in recruiting their friends.

REWORK

They began to see the results of their efforts. By the end of the year, detachment 772 boasted 42 students.

At the same time, the Air Force decided not to shut down the last 2-year program, but to expand 2-year program availability across all detachments. The Trump administration wanted to expand the number of Air Force officers, so all 4-year institutions would now also create 2-year paths for officer candidates. Moreover, they would also create a 1-year training path for those who qualified and this included the recruitment of graduate students—a largely untapped market. The detachment could now offer 4-year, 2-year, and 1-year paths to service.

Before the 2017-2018 school year began, Lt Col Watson met with her team again and set a goal of 80 students (See Exhibit 2). Just one year earlier they had only nine, but now, with 42 students, a goal of 80 didn't sound crazy.

Lt Col Watson understood what she was asking. It would be difficult, but she knew her team and she understood the task. In a previous assignment as a recruiting officer, she found that recruiting had a learning curve. Much of the cadre's success depended on learning how to identify and work with the school administration at CSU, CofC, MUSC, and Trident Tech.

In the process, Lt Col Watson and Maj Champagne learned which potential cadets were likely to be successful. In the first year, they experienced amazing growth, but only a few of their cadets were qualified to compete for scholarships and this had to change.

WILL IT WORK?

The cadre faced a dilemma. Should they pursue growth or pursue only the students who were most likely to succeed? Moreover, if they pursued only the most qualified, would they be taking away opportunities from those who needed them most?

They began the fall 2017 semester with just under 60 cadets (57 active cadets and two who deployed). This figure was well short of the 80 they had hoped for, but the

new cadets had greater potential to gain scholarships. These scholarships are a minimum of \$20,000 per year. Scholarships are quite an allurements, but that is not the only reason higher-quality cadets were important.

TEAMWORK

The number of students sent to field training have increased at the same time. Cadets who completed this summer training program between their sophomore and junior years become POCs (which stands for Professional Officer Course). POCs take leadership positions as cadet officers in the wing and they help to train younger cadets in the detachment. In 2017, Lt Col Watson expected 27 students to complete field training. When they started in 2016, they only had two, and that made it difficult to create a cadet wing structure. The following year, they had more than 35 officers to draw upon for cadet leadership positions.

Most importantly, those who completed the summer training program were contracted to become commissioned officers. As Lt Col Watson explained, “Ultimately, we’re here to commission.”

TABLE 1:
Program Growth Statistics by the Numbers

Academic Year	Number of cadets	Number of Scholarships	Number of cadets sent to Field Training	Number of Cadets Commissioned
2015-2016	9	1	2	3
2016-2017	42	6	15	3
2017-2018	53	9*	27	11

*The school year is not over. They have a potential of 14 scholarships.

Success introduced new challenges. The cadre had to adjust and move toward a different model of leadership. When they started, they had to do a lot of the training themselves. Once they had enough POCs, they had to transition from leading the detachment to equipping their growing pool of senior cadets to lead the others. It was the difference between playing quarterback and being a coach.

Lt Col Watson attributed much of their success to “having the right people here at the right time.” For example, Maj Champagne was the marketing and recruiting expert. She was a Public Affairs Officer and she had a public relations background. She explained, “Everything I have ever done in my career set me up for this job. Looking back, even in my enlisted years, I was a recruiter’s assistant and I have a recruiter medal.” She was quite comfortable in her role.

Major Baxley, the other officer, was a graduate of the Air Force Academy. She later trained cadets at the Air Force Academy. Her primary role was training.

The detachment also had two non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Master Sergeant Johnson was a former chaplain's assistant. According to Lt Col Watson, "her greatest asset is her ability to talk to our cadets and they open up to her." Staff Sergeant Jones earned a masters degree in counseling. This was quite an advantage in an environment that was heavily driven by counseling.

THE WORKPLACE

The enrollment increase was a mixed blessing. The growing number of student leaders freed the cadre from some direct responsibilities, but they simultaneously required more mentoring. Though fully staffed, the faculty to student ratio grew from 1:3 to 1:10. That ratio might not sound like a problem until you understand the labor-intensive nature of the job.

Lt Col Watson's 300-level class increased from 4 or 5 to twenty students. The Air Force is intentional about leadership development and each student was continually counseled. Cadets received individual feedback, midterm feedback, and ongoing mentoring.

Cadre were constantly evaluating cadets' strengths and weaknesses, determining areas for improvement, and setting up scenarios to help them improve. Beyond academic counseling, cadre monitored discipline issues, social issues, physical fitness, and weight. They had to simultaneously play the roles of professor, disciplinarian, and coach. They had to do it with every student from each of the participating schools. The level of complexity did not increase arithmetically, but geometrically.

Maj Champagne explained that they walked cadets through the medical process, security clearance process, career field counseling—their Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC), and various other processes. It was a hands-on investment in each student, and it was quite labor intensive.

The expanded workload was felt behind the scenes. The second and third-order effects of handling nearly 60 students is far different than those of handling nine students. The effect is felt even in the mundane—as when they order paper and ink to handle the large volume of military documentation required for each student.

The facilities were another problem. Facilities were sufficient for nine cadets, but the building has not expanded while the corps of cadets multiplied six-fold. Lt Col Watson was quick to note that she appreciated the university's support stating, "We are fortunate that our university supports us the way they do." Nevertheless, they were running out of physical space.

The Air Force required them to maintain certain standards such as space for offices, common rooms, and storage for secure materials. Cadet officers needed a workspace; their time in the program was supposed to mimic the way that they would interact on active duty. But space on campus was at a premium and per capita growth far surpassed facility growth.

Watson noted, “Where we are lacking in facilities, we get *everything* else.” She explained that she had tried unsuccessfully to get the Air Force to provide Color Guard equipment, but when she brought her request to the university administration, the university provided the funds. This was a win-win because the Color Guard provided a service to the university for major events and it is free marketing for the program.

OVERWORKED

Watson estimated that the cadre spent a minimum of 10 to 15 hours on each student each semester. High performers may receive 20 hours or more; Low performers may require 40 to 50 hours. This estimate did not include classroom time.

Beyond class, students participated in a leadership lab, physical training (PT), initial and mid-term counseling, additional counseling to remedy poor performance, scholarship paperwork, career counseling, and informal time spent mentoring. Then, cadre must be on hand at recruiting events such as football games, color guard presentations, fundraising activities, etc. (See Exhibit 3).

Were time equally divided among the cadre, their time mentoring nine students would have translated into an additional 60 hours per instructor over the course of the semester. With 60 students, this translated into an additional 240 hours per instructor. This was *before* they began recruiting for new students or teaching classes.

In addition, as Air Force Officers, the cadre still had to maintain their professional military responsibilities, including their own physical training tests, professional Air Force training, Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs) to stay current in their fields, and 24 hours a year of additional computer-based training. All told, they already work 70-hour weeks.

The Air Force would provide additional cadre, but only if they recruited more cadets, becoming a medium-sized detachment. At the present time, Detachment 772 is considered a small detachment. The cut-off for a small school is 60 students. Medium-sized detachments range from 60 to 150 cadets. Large detachments have 150 or more students.

The cadre have striven to be an example to their cadets, living the detachment's motto: "INTEGRITAS SERVITIUM EXIMIETATE," Latin for "integrity, service, and excellence," (See Exhibit 4) but how excellent could they be if they continued at this pace? Hard choices would have to be made. Some students didn't make the cut because the cadre simply did not have the capacity to mentor all of them. As Maj Champagne contemplated all of these factors, she said, "I want to recruit and give low country students an opportunity, but at what cost?"

The first crop of students needed a great deal of attention. Because the number of cadre did not expand, they may have to be more judicious about whom they allow in the program in the future. Maj Champagne continued, "The biggest thing I struggle with are those freshmen and sophomore students that I invest so much time in. They are the ones who leave...I am more committed than they are."

Lt Col Watson added, "It is important for the Air Force to have diversity... but some students are going to take a lot more care and feeding, and molding and shaping, because they have no idea what this military thing is....I may have to put more into this cadet over that one, and in the end, I am going to have two stellar cadets. One just took a little longer to get there.... Although I have diversity in mind, I am also thinking about their potential for success if they enter my program."

As they move forward, Lt Col Watson and her team need to re-evaluate their approach. By every metric, they have been successful. They know that they can grow, but growth has created new problems—overcrowding, limited time, and the need to discriminate between students who can make it and those who cannot. As she reflects on the nine students she started with, she recognizes that these are "good problems," but they are still problems. As Watson considers her options, she knows that her most important criterion is her mission—commissioning officers for the United States Air Force. What should she do?

EXHIBIT 1

Cadets Gathered for Leadership Lab



EXHIBIT 2

Maj Champagne At Her Desk (See the handwritten note on the wall: “Pulling for 80 cadets”).



EXHIBIT 3

Cadets Gathered for Physical Training (PT)



EXHIBIT 4

Seal of Detachment 772

