

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

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*Lt Col 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.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

“Something has to change,” Lt Col Watson thought to herself. “What we are doing is unsustainable.”

Watson was approaching the end of her last assignment before leaving the Air Force. With just seven months to go, she was re-evaluating her effectiveness as Detachment Commander. Watson and her team had done remarkably well, but now they had inadvertently created a whole new set of problems to address if they were going to take their Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps (AFROTC) detachment to the next level.

Watson is 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

has returned to take command of detachment 772, the AFROTC program at Charleston Southern University.

### **GROUNDWORK**

When Lt Col Watson arrived on the campus of Charleston Southern University in 2014, the detachment was small. It had always been small. It was positioned to remain small. There are 145 AFROTC detachments, but the program at CSU was just one of two 2-year AFROTC detachments 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, the detachment 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 to grow, but to acquire those resources, they needed to be larger. So, it was a catch-22.

### **WORKING THE SYSTEM**

Sequestration and force-shaping made additional resources improbable, but when Watson's boss, Colonel Kerriker, 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 Champagne came aboard in January of 2016. As a reservist herself, Champagne knew how to get other reservists activated, and they filled the second enlisted slot. Now at full strength, they got to the hard work of growing the program.

Detachment 772 is in the shadow of the Citadel. Its home is Charleston Southern University, but the program draws students from the College of Charleston, Medical University of South Carolina, and Trident Tech.

## **NETWORKING**

In May of 2016, Lt Col Watson met with her team and discussed 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 (five of which were returning). They were nearly all CSU students or prior service members connected through Joint Base Charleston.

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

The cadre was intentional about building bridges with key staff at CSU. While some ROTC programs have a strained relationship with the university administration, ROTC programs were always welcome at CSU. Lt Col Watson's team was embraced because of the way that they aggressively 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. University relations helped the cadre with a media blitz, revamped the AFROTC website, and provided marketing tools.

Major Kimberly 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*, where parents of prospective students could hear about what the detachment had to offer. They taught the admissions office about the types of scholarships that the Air Force could provide. They were available on registration day too.

Before long the admissions office was coming to the cadre saying, "We've got a student interested in ROTC, can you talk to them?" In the process, the cadre and admissions staff developed a symbiotic relationship. Students who came to CSU because of the ROTC program helped recruiters do their jobs more effectively. They made a great deal of progress by demonstrating how they could be valuable, rather than asking for favors. Then they duplicated these efforts elsewhere.

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

Then they repeated this approach again at the Medical University of South Carolina and Trident Tech. As a two-year program, Trident Tech was not a rich source of recruits, but now that the detachment was a 4-year program, the junior college was quite valuable. Trident Tech students could compete for ROTC scholarships, and students could seamlessly transfer to Charleston Southern University to complete their degree.

They worked with the registrar to smooth the path for students at other institutions. As Major 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**

Back at CSU, Lt Col Watson and Major Champagne walked the campus, talking to the faculty and staff to increase their visibility. Students were 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.

The cadre are professors of Aerospace Studies, and they were intentional about working with those professors who advised cadets to ensure that they understood the ROTC academic plan. ROTC cadets earn a minor in Aerospace Studies. Because they are not competing with academic majors, professors did not view ROTC as competition but as a complement to a student's academic plan. Professors began to view the cadre as academic support staff who would deal with cadets who were out of line or falling behind.

### **REWORK**

Everything was falling in line. 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 two-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. They would also create a one-year training path for those who qualified; this included the recruitment of graduate students—a largely untapped market. The detachment could offer 4-year, 2-year, and 1-year paths to service.

As the 2017-2018 school year approached, 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. This 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 and then repeating that process at the College of Charleston and Trident Tech.

In the process, Watson and Champagne also learned which potential cadets would be or would not be successful. In the first year, they had amazing experienced growth, but few of their cadets were qualified to compete for scholarships and this had to change.

### **WILL IT WORK?**

Now 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 have deployed), 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 whole story.

### **TEAMWORK**

The number of students sent to field training have increased too. Cadets who complete this summer training program between their sophomore and junior years become POCs (Professional Officer Course). POCs take leadership positions (officers) in the wing and they help train younger cadets in the detachment. This year, Lt Col Watson expects 27 students to complete field training. When they started in 2016, they only had two, and that makes it difficult to create a cadet wing

structure. The following year, they should have 35 or more to draw upon for cadet leadership positions.

Most importantly, those who complete the summer training program are contracted to become commissioned officers. “Ultimately, we’re here to commission,” Watson explained.

**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 has brought new challenges. The cadre must move toward a different model of leadership. Last year, they had to do a lot of the training themselves. Now they have to transition from leading the detachment to equipping their growing pool of senior cadets to lead the rest. It is the difference between playing quarterback and being a coach.

Lt Col Watson attributes much of their success to “having the right people here at the right time.” Maj Champagne is the marketing and recruiting expert. She is a Public Affairs Officer and she has 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 is comfortable in her role.

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

The detachment also has two non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Master Sergeant Johnson was a chaplain’s assistant. According to Watson, “her greatest asset is her ability to talk to our cadets and they open up to her.” Staff Sergeant Jones has a master’s degree in counseling. This is quite an advantage in an environment that is heavily driven by mentoring.

### **THE WORKPLACE**

The growing number of student leaders free the cadre from some direct responsibility, but it also requires more mentoring. The number of students is a blessing and a curse. Though fully staffed the faculty to student ratio has moved

from 1:3 to 1:10. That ratio does not sound like a problem until you understand how labor intensive the job is.

Academically, Lt Col Watson's 300-level class has gone from 4 or 5 to twenty students. The Air Force is intentional about leadership development. Each student is counseled. They get individual feedback, midterm feedback, and ongoing mentoring.

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

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

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

The facilities are another problem. They 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 appreciates the university's support: "We are fortunate that our university supports us the way they do." Nevertheless, they are running out of physical space.

The Air Force requires them to maintain certain standards such as space for offices, common rooms, and storage for secure materials. Cadet officers need a workspace; their time in the program is supposed to mimic the way that they would interact on active duty. But space on campus is at a premium and there is no guarantee that per capita growth will lead to 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 provides a service to the university for major events and it is free marketing for the program.

### **OVERWORKED**

Watson estimated that the cadre spend 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 is above and beyond classroom time.

Beyond class, students participate in a leadership lab, physical training, 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, fundraising, etc. (See Exhibit 3).

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

As Air Force Officers, the cadre still have to maintain their professional military responsibilities, including their own PT 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 will provide additional cadre, but only if they have more students and become 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.

They cadre have striven to be an example to their cadets, living the detachment's motto: "INTEGRITAS SERVITIUM EXIMIETATE," Latin for "integrity, service, and excellence," but how excellent could they be if they continued this pace? Hard choices would have to be made. Some students would not make the cut because the cadre simply did not have the capacity to mentor all of them. As Major 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 more care and feeding. Because the cadre did not expand, they may have to be more judicious about who they allow in the program. She 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?

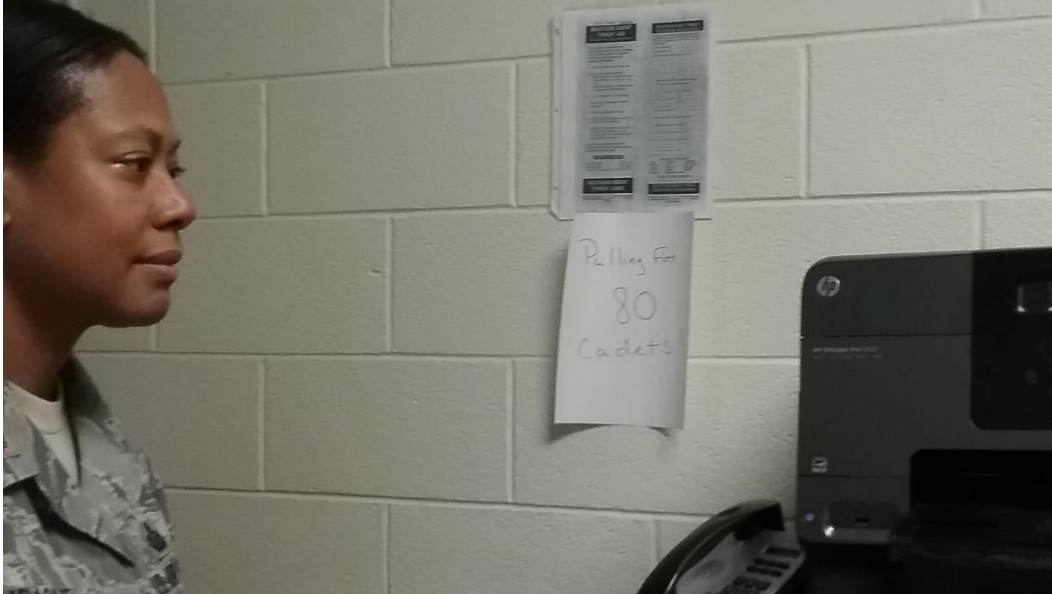
**EXHIBIT 1**

**Cadets Gathered for Leadership Lab**



**EXHIBIT 2**

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



**EXHIBIT 3**

**Cadets Gathered for Physical Training**

