



NATIONAL CADET ADVISORY COUNCIL
CIVIL AIR PATROL
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AUXILIARY
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Civil Air Patrol currently faces a dire issue in cadet retention. Nearly 70% of our new cadets drop out during the first year alone, and more still are lost as they approach the top tiers of the program. During the course of the 2004 – 2005 term, the National Cadet Advisory Council has been approached by a number of different parties within the national infrastructure on how these losses can be combated. As can well be expected, this is not a problem with an easy and quick solution. As an organization, Civil Air Patrol needs to adjust the way it works with senior cadet officers – the cadet officers who have arguably gotten the most out of the program, and into whom the most has been invested. Adjusting the way we do things for our senior cadet officers is not a simple process; rather than a single step, a series of initiatives must be taken to help deal with the issues facing the Civil Air Patrol Cadet Program. This paper will lay out the general strategy that the National Cadet Advisory Council has formulated to deal with this problem, and hopefully answer questions that such a strategy might raise.

The CAP cadet program, when properly implemented, is a highly successful program, and one which could easily grab the attention of young men and women. However, it seems that properly implementing the program is one of the biggest problems to be overcome. As a program designed to be run for cadets by cadets, our program is often crippled by a lack of senior cadet leaders to provide input to Cadet Programs officers throughout the program. This, when combined with a lack of Cadet Programs personnel in general (especially experienced personnel with several years in the program), creates a situation which is not conducive to retention. The council believes that the best way to combat the lack of both senior cadet leaders and experienced Cadet Programs personnel is to focus on retaining those cadets who are nearing the end of the Cadet Program – Phase 4 cadet officers.

At first glance, this may seem to be opposite of where we should be focusing our activities. With a retention rate of only approximately 30% in the first year, it seems that the issue lies not with the cadets leaving the program at Phase 4, but rather with cadets who barely make it into Phase 2. While the council certainly thinks that some direct measures should be taken to help bring down the loss rate in the first year (for example, the requirement of some kind of orientation program before joining), we overall feel that this is merely a symptom of a greater problem. Rather than simply treating the symptoms, we would like to cut straight to the heart of the issue, and we feel the heart of the issue lies in a lack of executive leadership. When properly implemented, the Cadet Program is extremely attractive to young men and women, and this can be seen in many units across the nation. There is no magic formula for being successful with a CAP unit – all it takes is hard work, dedication, and a bit of understanding in how the program is supposed to work.

Phase 4 cadet officers are cadets with years of experience in the program. They are versed in the program and its intricacies and have the experience of execution under their belt, so to speak. These are cadets who were brought into the program, made their way through the leadership curriculum, and are now in the final stages of cadet training. We, as an organization, have invested a great deal in them, and their loss is strongly felt in the cadet echelons. The longer these cadets can be retained as cadets, working to pass on their knowledge and skills, the better. Even moreso, it is precisely this kind of cadet who, with proper training and a bit of experience, makes a great Cadet Programs Officer. By focusing our retention efforts on these cadet officers (and bringing them back into the fold as senior members) we can rapidly build a corps of educated Cadet Programs personnel who have the functional background a person needs to be an excellent Cadet Programs Officer.

The council recognizes the fact that many cadets go to the senior member program and are a bit too “hands-on” at first when dealing with cadets. However, even if this remains the case (which it undoubtedly will), there will still be many Phase 4 cadets who go senior and are able to make the transition well and provide a great deal of senior support to the Cadet Program. Thus, by focusing our efforts on retaining Phase 4 cadets (both active cadets and those transitioning to senior member), we can build a better corps of senior

members to administer the program and a better corps of executive cadet leaders to teach the next generations. This effect will ripple out through the program, each level successively building on the one beneath it, with the desired end effect of an overall increase in retention.

The initiatives the council brings forward today are varied and address a number of issues across the board, all of which are important to the retention question facing CAP. Each needs careful consideration, and is only briefly discussed below. All of these proposals would make a positive impact on the Cadet Program; however, if passed together, the effect will be significantly greater.

The council has forwarded on a proposal originally routed to us from the Infrastructure Committee regarding a reservist status for former cadet members. This plan allows former cadet officers to remain in a semi-active state for some time after going senior member, with a significant amount of savings to the member and a lessened responsibility for the former cadet. In the transitory period in which we lose many cadets (the 18-21 year old population group), a young person's life is going through a great upheaval. Many times, a cadet may be moving away for college, or entering into military service of some kind, and these new stresses may make them feel like they do not have time for CAP anymore. The reservist program offers an alternative for a cadet which preserves their status in CAP while allowing them to remain as active or inactive as they need be. Naturally, there are limits on this program, which are detailed in the formal proposal. Also, by having these former cadet officers transfer to a reservist state for some time (where they are limited in their scope, and cannot so easily become "super cadet commander"), we can begin the seasoning process which is necessary for our cadets to become better senior members.

We have also examined the problem of C/Lt Cols, and the lack of recognition they receive as seniors for their accomplishments as cadets. Although they complete the exact same amount of senior member training as a C/Col, they are only granted the grade of 1st Lt upon becoming a senior member. A C/Col is granted the grade of Capt upon transfer to the senior program. By approaching this problem, we can convince the C/Lt Cols that the program does care about their contributions, and that they have not labored in vain, thus hopefully contributing – even in a small amount – to retaining them to our program.

Finally, the council has examined the feasibility of allowing certain cadets the ability to earn specialty track ratings in nearly every field. This stems from the fact that, even when a C/Lt Col or C/Col has completed all the required training for the Cadet Program, they are not permitted to continue their education by taking on senior training. This is an oversight which could cause many of our senior cadet officers to stagnate, become bored, and leave the program. If we continue to challenge them and make them feel vital to the program, they will be more likely to stay with it. Stopping them with the reason of "You're only a cadet" is shortsighted, especially when they are 18 or older, at which point they could be training in a specialty if they just transferred their membership.

The National Cadet Advisory Council has spent a great deal of time this year examining the issues surrounding the retention problem, and believes that these steps are a good way to start combating the problems Civil Air Patrol is facing. By attacking this issue from multiple angles and different points, we can hopefully generate momentum in the opposite direction, leading to a better program for all involved. The steps outlined above may seem radical in some ways, but doing the same old thing in the same old way is clearly not what is needed now. This strategy combats stagnation, revitalizes interest, and most of all, tries to create a sense of value, belonging, and importance in the upper echelons of cadet leaders so they may be retained and eventually contribute back as senior members. If this feeling of value and belonging can be generated, the program will have gone a long way towards fixing the retention problem it faces today.

On behalf of the council,

THOMAS A. REHMAN, C/Lt Col, CAP
Great Lakes Region Asst. Representative
National Cadet Advisory Council