

We Are What They Think We Are

Part 3 of 3

By Capt. Uriah Orland
Academy Public Affairs

Headlines such as “Academy named best in West for 2nd straight year;” “Air Force mascot, The Bird, makes All-America mascot team;” and, “Academy ranks top in professor availability,” highlight the tip of the iceberg for the great things people here do daily.

Receiving coverage like this is rooted in the second goal in the Academy’s Strategic Plan – “Strengthen our communications and reputation.”

The first part of the goal is to “strengthen the Academy’s strategic communication.”

“Strategic communication involves developing and synchronizing key themes and messages among everyone and every organization helping to tell the Academy story,” said Johnny Whitaker, director of Academy communications. “It’s a ‘one message, many voices’ approach to reaching specific, targeted audiences.”

In order to deliver the right message, everyone assigned to the Academy must understand how they contribute to accomplishing the Academy’s mission.

“When asked what you do at the Academy, the answer isn’t, ‘I coach volleyball’ or ‘I teach math’ or ‘I work in finance’,” said Superintendent Lt. Gen. John Regni. “The answer is, ‘I develop officers of character’.”

It is understandable that each mission element has a specific mission; however, all organizations collectively accomplish the Academy’s mission. To tell that story, everyone must have a consistent, accurate and timely message. The strategic plan provides the guidance toward achieving this unity of voice.

Through a unified message, the Academy can accomplish part two of the goal – “Enhance our reputation. Communicate USAFA’s reputation as a proud symbol of the Air Force to the American people.”

This goal is not unique to the Academy. In his first CSAF Vector, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz wrote, “We will work relentlessly to earn and keep the trust of our civilian leaders, our Joint and Coali-



tion partners, and the American people ... We will adhere to the highest standards of personal ethics, compliance and individual performance.”

This focus illustrates the importance of renewing a favorable reputation of the Air Force, and, in turn, the U.S. Air Force Academy.

“Our reputation is what others think about who we are and what we do. Targeting the right stories with the right audience to educate them about that is one of the hardest challenges we have in strategic communication,” said Mr. Whitaker. “Different audiences are looking for different pieces of news about the Academy. For example, a local reporter is looking for a different story than a high school student interested in coming here or a congressman inquiring with a political agenda.”

In the media, local and national, Academy stories are weighed against other stories to determine the relevance to the local and national readership or viewership. Academy news competes for space in the papers or on the airwaves.

“We look for the human-interest stories, the things that make you perk up your ears and say wow, what happened there or how did that happen,” said Jon Karroll, evening news anchor for KRDO, Channel 13. “At the Academy we are looking for the visuals — ceremonies and activities that involve a large number of cadets and their families, and events that have an impact on the community as a whole.”

Another avenue of promoting the Academy to the general public is through the 27 Division-I intercollegiate teams.

“I don’t know that there is any other aspect of Academy life that gets national scrutiny and national coverage like athletic teams do,”

said Dr. Hans Mueh, director of athletics. “For right or for wrong, I keep telling the dean, there is no academic page, but there certainly is a sports page. And because of that, my coaches have a very high responsibility to present, through their teams, that image of what we are about.”

“We have to walk the talk,” he continued. “If we claim to be an institution of high values, high integrity and character development, our teams have to win with class and lose with class. They have to be respectful on the road. They have to live the values we have. Fight with courage, discipline and self control and all those things that are part of sportsmanship at its best.”

Perhaps the real litmus test for reputation is public opinion. In 2003 and 2004, several events occurred that may have lowered the public’s opinion of the Academy. However, since that time, Academy leadership has taken extraordinary steps to focus on character development and respect for human dignity. “Several events happened that created a flurry of negative press about the Academy in 2003 and 2004,” said Mr. Whitaker. “Despite the news that may be generated, it is imperative that we always provide timely, honest and open information to the public, whether it is good news or bad news.”

This upfront, truth always, approach has had an impact. In media analysis conducted over the last year, about 76 percent of Academy coverage is classified as “good news.”

One example of this good news is what well-known comedian Carlos Mencia said after visiting the Academy.

“Being a student at the Air Force Academy is what every little kid aspires to achieve,” he said. “We all dream of flying and the Academy is the place that makes that dream a reality.”