The current Free Cadet Uniform program (FCU) provides a “blues” uniform to any cadet who requests one, on a first-come, first-served basis, and depending on budget availability. As presently construed, the FCU costs $450K to $500K annually, though actual expenditures have been much less recently due to the federal budget situation. The FCU is the second most expensive line in the cadet budget, after flying. In an environment of shrinking budgets, we need to look for efficiencies in programs like the FCU.

There are at least four problems with the current program:

1. **Non-essential.** Over the past year, the program has been on hold for several months due to budget reasons, and despite the hold, very few people have expressed major concerns about the unavailability of free uniforms, though those who have spoken up say the FCU is essential.

2. **Expensive.** In an environment of belt-tightening, money spent on uniforms means less opportunity for flying or other cadet services.

3. **Inefficient.** The program "wastes" money by outfitting cadets whose families can easily afford to obtain one on their own; eligibility is not means-tested.

4. **Questioned.** Auditors have scrutinized the program due to its relatively high cost and low ROI, as cadets may quit after having worn the uniform only a short while.

This paper advocates for a means-tested FCU. We also present two other possible reforms. The option of keeping the status quo gives us a total of four possibilities.

► *For a quick summary of our recommendations, please see page 6.*
I. Recommend Policy: Means-Test FCU Eligibility & Continue with the Blues Uniform

Critical Need. The uniform is a critical part of the cadet experience. Without it, you’re not a cadet. Therefore, there is a need to outfit cadets who otherwise could not participate in our program. The challenge then is to redesign the FCU so that it is needs-based but still simple to manage.

Reduce Funding. For those reasons, we propose reducing annual FCU funding by 70% to $150K. That level of funding will outfit 2,200 cadets annually, which represents 18% of the new cadets who enter CAP each year. Approximately 15% of Americans participate in the SNAP (food stamp) program, so there is a logic to this proposed funding level.\(^1\) As the fiscal year(s) progress, management could increase funding if the need exceeds our expectations. Over time, CAP will learn if the “right” percent of cadets needing service is 18% or if it’s a bit more or less.

Eligibility. To keep the FCU simple to manage and easily understandable to the families who use it, the eligibility requirements would be aligned with benchmarks that already do a good job at determining financial need. The school lunch and WIC programs are two examples. Cadets and their parents or guardians would self-qualify for the FCU, a sort of honor system where they do not need to provide documentation proving they meet the eligibility requirements. At first glance, that may seem irresponsible and open to fraud, but we see at least three factors that support a self-qualifying system. First, consider that the law allows CAP (through USAF) to provide a free uniform to every cadet, and we’ve done so for the previous ten years or more, regardless of need.\(^2\) Second, there is a built-in social stigma in applying for a benefit like the FCU, which will dissuade ineligible families from requesting a uniform. And finally, the individual benefit is only worth $70 and it is not uncommon for financial aid programs to use a self-qualifying system for such a meager benefit – the expense in verifying eligibility could easily surpass a reasonable percent of the total program’s funding.

Savings. Redesigning the FCU to be needs-based and self-qualifying will allow us to reduce funding by about $350K annually and use those savings to serve cadets through flying, activities, textbooks, and other essentials without compromising our ability to achieve our strategic goals.

Proposed FCU Webpage

The Free Cadet Uniform (FCU) program provides the basic Air Force-style “blues” uniform at no cost to qualifying cadets (a $70 value). Uniform insignia and shoes must be purchased separately or provided by the squadron.

Program Goal: To outfit cadets who cannot otherwise obtain a uniform without experiencing a financial hardship.

Eligibility Criteria: A cadet may request a uniform if he, she, or his parent(s) or guardian(s) meets any of the criteria listed below.

1. Has a sibling already enrolled in the Cadet Program and cannot easily afford to purchase a second uniform. (The FCU uniform may be ordered for the new cadet, or alternatively, the existing cadet’s uniform could be passed down to the new cadet and a new FCU uniform ordered for the existing cadet. If two cadets join simultaneously, only one FCU may be requested unless the family meets any of the other criteria below.)
2. Has a parent or guardian who is currently unemployed or has been unemployed during the previous 12 months
3. Qualified for an Earned Income Tax Credit of $2,000 or more during the previous year or current year
4. Receives free or reduced school lunch
5. Receives SNAP or WIC benefits
6. Receives Social Security benefits for children

\(^2\) 10 USC 99444.8.11a

II. **Option 2: Provide a Means-Tested BDU Uniform in lieu of Blues**

*Uniform Type.* We currently provide only blues through the FCU, not BDUs. Why? Perhaps that’s because back in the 1990s wings and squadrons could obtain used BDUs through their local DoD installation. None of the services wear woodland camouflage BDUs anymore, so DoD is no longer a realistic source for free, second-hand BDUs.

*Practicality.* The BDU is arguably more practical than the blues; if a cadet could have only one uniform, he or she could possibly wear BDUs to any cadet activity. In contrast, blues are inappropriate for the “down and dirty” activities.

*Image.* An intangible factor should be considered here, as blues and BDUs present two different images to the public. My personal view is that blues present our cadets as sharp, clean-cut, and academically minded. In contrast, BDUs may convey a negative image in the minds of some who are suspicious of “the military.” Blues suggest a seriousness of purpose that is not found in the BDUs. Others might disagree with these views.

*USAF Style.* From a motivational and a doctrinal perspective, it makes sense that cadets would be outfitted with an Air Force-style uniform to underscore CAP’s affiliation with the
Air Force. Only the blues uniform is an official Air Force uniform; BDUs are no longer authentically Air Force.

**Unit Cost.** BDUs are slightly less expensive than blues. The basic garments (shirt/blouse, trousers/skirt, and hat) cost $70 on average for blues, but only $55 for BDUs (a 21% savings) and there’s a possibility that CAP could negotiate the BDU price down through a commercial vendor (a $5 per unit reduction results in a 28% savings compared with blues).³ It is assumed that BDU shipping and handling would be roughly equal to that for blues.

**Legal Issues.** Legal counsel or perhaps the grants officer would need to confirm that CAP could use appropriated funds to purchase BDUs from the commercial market. The statute authorizing funding for cadet uniforms reads, “The SECAF may support the Cadet Program by furnishing articles of the Air Force uniform to cadets without cost.”⁴ Would it matter that a commercial vendor, not AAFES, became the supplier? That BDUs are no longer Air Force uniforms?

**Savings.** As explained earlier, a needs-based program saves $350K annually. By switching to BDUs, the savings grow to a total of $385K annually.

### III. Option 3: Prohibit Uniforms Until Earning C/Amn

**Sweat Equity.** Currently, the FCU is a benefit the cadet qualifies for upon joining, before he or she accomplishes anything in CAP. One option would be to make the FCU available only upon the cadet completing Achievement 1 and earning C/Amn. Sweat equity may assuage our auditors’ concerns because the cadet would have to demonstrate active participation. There is some precedence for this approach in that service academies make their freshmen earn the privilege of wearing a full uniform through a several week process preceding the start of the official school year. Strong, enterprising leaders at the local level could treat the uniform as an item of delayed gratification to the advantage of the cadets and the program. Still, leading a cadet unit is challenging enough; this option places an additional demand upon local leader’s time and effort. Further, if the auditors’ primary concern is getting a full year’s use of a uniform, that problem remains even if the FCU is issued later – there is always the potential for a fickle teenager to suddenly drop out of CAP to pursue a new interest.

**Curriculum Impact.** Current regulations require the cadet to demonstrate proper wear of the uniform to earn C/Amn. If we do not provide a uniform until after that promotion, a major component of the Achievement 1 curriculum would need re-tooling.

**Social Inequity.** Middle class and affluent cadets can afford to purchase uniforms and conceivably could wear the uniform immediately upon joining. In contrast, disadvantaged cadets who cannot buy their own uniforms would have to go without. Unless we instituted a mandatory “no uniforms until C/Amn” policy, disadvantaged cadets would really stick out at the time when we’re trying to emphasize team unity.

**Duration of a “Reasonable” Delay.** If the program were changed so that the cadet qualifies for a FCU upon earning C/Amn, what would be the total time elapsed from his or her first CAP meeting until FCU delivery? The table below explains.
Data shows that 89% of cadets believe the uniform is “important” to them.\(^5\) The effects of delaying the privilege of wearing a uniform by three months or more is unknown, but would likely have a negative effect upon participation, motivation to advance, and therefore motivation to renew.

**Cost Savings Under the C/Amn Policy.** Presently, all new cadets are eligible for a FCU. With means-testing, only 2,200 or 18% of new cadets would qualify for a FCU. By adding a new requirement in the cadet having to earn C/Amn, that cohort would shrink further still by approximately 40% (see “Rank Distribution” chart at right). Making a conservative estimate of 30%, the result is a program serving 1,600 cadets and achieving an additional $45K in savings on top of Option #1’s existing savings, for a total savings of just under $400K.

**Interim Casual Uniform.** To hedge against the diminished enthusiasm, perhaps CAP could adopt an inexpensive, casual uniform for newcomers to wear until the Air Force-style uniform arrived. New cadets could be asked to wear khakis (likely found in their closet) and a plain blue polo shirt (sold at Walmart for $8). From the perspective of an organization trying to quickly outfit newcomers with an inexpensive uniform for sake of team identity, this approach makes a lot of sense. However, cadets are not simply youth entering a club, they are cadets entering an Air Force-affiliated cadet program. Make no mistake, this would represent a fundamental change in the cadet experience, affecting cadets’ self-identity in their early months, and significantly altering the CAP brand.

**Concerns Regarding the Program Environment.** Were CAP operating in a residential setting where mentors could impart encouragement and focus upon newcomers on a daily and even hourly basis – like at a boarding school or service academy – the delay in the uniform could actually enhance cadet indoctrination. In our program setting, with meetings once a week, we fear that delaying the uniform would take a major tool out of the hands of local leaders. This whole issue demonstrates that in many regards, the human relations challenges that our squadron-level leaders face are more daunting than what professional cadre face at the service academies.

**Key Question.** In considering this Option #3, perhaps the key question is this: Is a potential savings of $45K worth a fundamental reconfiguration of the Cadet Program and the risk of serious decline in cadet participation? No.

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6. Findings are from a 2011 survey, N=454.
IV. Final Thoughts

An Underfunded Investment. Outside of the cadet community, uniforms can be viewed as an expense, and in light of our 40 year historical average for first year retention at 30% to 35%, an auditor with a financial perspective may see inefficiency. At the ground level, however, cadet programs officers see the uniform as a critical and underfunded investment. We do not equip cadets with shoes, nor BDUs and boots, nor required accouterments. Retention might be holding in the 33% neighborhood because the self-pay strategy for most uniform items is a barrier to full and active participation. If CAP had more resources, perhaps we would be wise to put even more funding into FCUs, versus trying means-testing or other alternatives to save money.

Summary of Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Synopsis</th>
<th>Cadets Served</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Potential Savings</th>
<th>Total Annual Cost</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Means-Testing with Blues</td>
<td>2,200 18%</td>
<td>Provides the basic uniform to those who need it via a self-qualifying eligibility system.</td>
<td>$350K</td>
<td>$150K</td>
<td>Best Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Means-Testing with BDUs</td>
<td>2,200 18%</td>
<td>Provides a cheaper and practical, but non-USAF, uniform to those who need it via a self-qualifying eligibility system.</td>
<td>$385K</td>
<td>$140K</td>
<td>Good Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Means-Testing with Blues or BDUs and Prohibiting Cadets from Wearing a Uniform Until C/Ann</td>
<td>1,600 13%</td>
<td>Too much upheaval in the program to justify the limited cost savings in comparison with Options #1 and #2.</td>
<td>$400K</td>
<td>$115K</td>
<td>Poor Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Status Quo: FCU Blues for All</td>
<td>12,000 100%</td>
<td>In practice, some new cadets never request a FCU, so we are unlikely to ever see 100% participation.</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$500K</td>
<td>Poor Choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suggestions for further discussion in the cadet community:

1. Do you agree that it’s more important to get a cadet flying and provide textbooks than a free uniform? Are we right to prioritize those goals over the FCU?
2. Do you agree that 75% or more cadets’ families can obtain a uniform on their own without experiencing a financial hardship? Or is the cadet population more affluent or more disadvantage than the norm?
3. Did we overlook an idea?