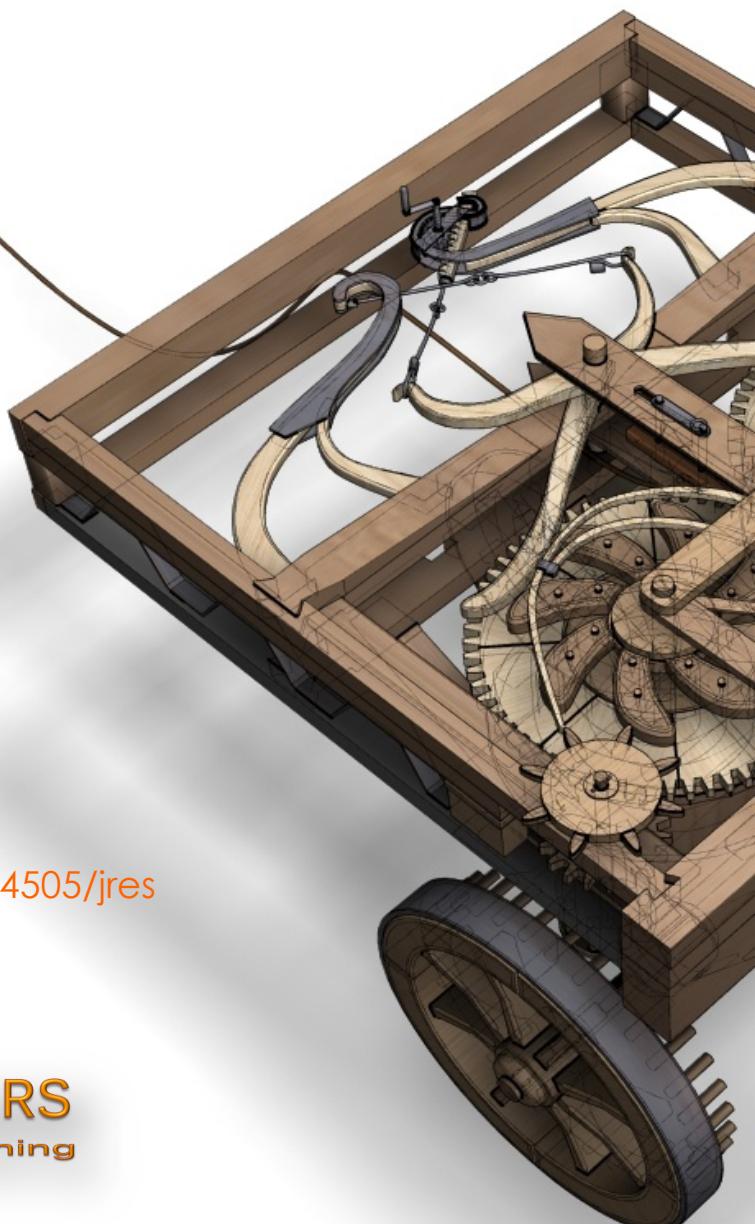


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Volume XVII, Issue 1(21)
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Multifaceted Factors Contributing to the Closure of Valley Forge Military Academy an Examination of Management, Economic, Legal, and Social Influences

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Abstract: This paper examines the rise and eventual closure of Valley Forge Military Academy (VFMA), a once-prominent American private military educational institution. Founded in 1928 and long celebrated for its unique Sandhurst-inspired traditions, VFMA faced escalating pressures from declining enrollment, rising operational costs, legal challenges, and shifting societal attitudes toward military education. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, including alumni and faculty interviews and quantitative survey data, the study identifies key factors behind the academy's decline, such as governance deficiencies, unsustainable financial practices, deferred maintenance, and reputation-damaging legal controversies. Drawing on theories of organizational failure and resilience, the analysis reveals how intertwined micro-level mismanagement, meso-level industry pressures, and macro-level external threats created a cumulative crisis that overwhelmed efforts at adaptation. Ultimately, VFMA's experience underscores the vulnerability of small, tuition-dependent institutions to market legal, and cultural forces, offering broader lessons for organizational sustainability and resilience in the educational sector.

Keywords: Military Academy; education; organizational decline; management; boarding school.

JEL Classification: I20; A12; A23; O32.

Introduction

In 1928, an all-male private boarding and day school named Valley Forge Military Academy (VFMA) was established in Wayne, Pennsylvania, operating for several decades as a prominent institution within the American educational landscape. In the 1940s, VFMA made the unique decision to model rank structure, drills, customs, and ceremonies on the British Army (Sandhurst) model, rather than the American model, which is popularized at colleges such as the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, The Citadel, and Virginia Military Institute. VFMA's alumni include General Norman Schwarzkopf, General H.R. McMaster, other distinguished military leaders, professional football player Larry Fitzgerald Jr., and J.D. Salinger, an acclaimed author, underscoring the school's historical capacity to attract and cultivate individuals who have achieved significant recognition in diverse fields. In the era following the Vietnam War, when other Military Academies were shutting their doors, VFMA sustained itself. In 1981, the movie 'TAPS', starring Tom Cruise, Sean Penn, and George C. Scott, was released. The movie was filmed at, and featured VFMA. Despite its storied past and notable graduates, and despite an April 2025 pledge of \$3 million from Alumnus Harry C. McCreary, Jr. and other sizable financial gifts, VFMA eventually faced insurmountable challenges leading to its closure, a trajectory mirroring that of other venerable institutions grappling with shifts in societal values and educational paradigms (Curry, 1972).

This paper delves into the complex interplay of management, economic, legal, and social factors that collectively contributed to VFMA's eventual closure, illustrating the multifaceted pressures impacting higher educational institutions in competitive markets (Paul, 2005). The investigation will particularly focus on how evolving market dynamics, institutional governance decisions, regulatory compliance demands, and changing societal expectations of military education ultimately culminated in the cessation of its operations. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the mechanisms of organizational failure within an educational context, drawing parallels with broader theories of business collapse (Higashi *et al.* 2020).

1. Literature Review

This review synthesizes existing scholarship on organizational failure, drawing upon frameworks that examine financial, legal, and organizational determinants of business closure to illuminate the complex forces at play in educational institutional decline (Zaman, 2023). Specifically, it will explore how macro-level factors, such as economic crises and shifts in taxation systems, alongside meso-level influences like competitive pressures and market rumors, can precipitate institutional demise (Higashi *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, micro-level issues, including mismanagement, insufficient strategic planning, and poor resource allocation, also contribute significantly to the vulnerability of educational establishments (Kelchen *et al.* 2024). The confluence of these elements, external environmental pressures, industry-specific challenges, and internal operational deficiencies, creates a precarious situation for organizations, often culminating in their dissolution (Samdanis & Lee, 2018). Moreover, hybrid organizations, such as military academies, face unique legitimization challenges in balancing competing institutional demands, which can lead to misaligned legitimization strategies and ultimately organizational failure (Siwale *et al.* 2021). This analysis, therefore, adopts a holistic approach, considering both endogenous weaknesses and exogenous pressures that collectively contribute to an organization's demise (Hager *et al.* 1996; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.* 2023). The dynamic interplay of these factors often necessitates a nuanced understanding of institutional resilience and susceptibility in navigating complex operational environments. Building upon this, an understanding of the evolutionary process of organizational failure, which is rarely a singular event but rather a dynamic unfolding over time, is crucial for comprehensively analyzing the closure of institutions like Valley Forge Military Academy (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.* 2023). Such an understanding often involves examining various theoretical lenses, including organizational ecology, industry life cycle theory, and organizational psychology, to fully grasp the internal and external forces driving decline (Fulop *et al.* 2023). This multi-level analytical approach, encompassing macrosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem factors, is essential for a robust examination of organizational failure in complex entities like military academies (Higashi *et al.* 2020). Specifically, this paper integrates insights from studies on organizational resilience in smaller, private non-profit higher educational institutions to explore how factors such as goal-directed solution seeking and avoidance may influence an institution's capacity to sustain effectiveness amidst decline (Moran, 2016). This approach acknowledges that organizational failure is often a symbiotic process between external and internal factors, with macro-level influences capable of independently driving institutional decline (Higashi *et al.* 2020). In this context, macro-level variables are external to an organization and, while common to all businesses, pose particular threats to entities less resilient to market shocks or long-term profitability squeezes (Higashi *et al.* 2020). Conversely, meso-level factors encompass industry-specific challenges, competitive dynamics, and sector-wide reputation issues that can erode an organization's standing and viability (Higashi *et al.* 2020). Finally, micro-level factors refer to internal organizational issues such as management inefficiencies, inadequate resource allocation, and a lack of strategic foresight that compromise an institution's operational integrity and long-term sustainability (Higashi *et al.* 2020). Within this multi-level framework, organizational resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt and thrive amidst persistent threats, becomes a critical determinant of survival, with a strong middle-tier infrastructure contributing significantly to stability and resource management (You, 2023; Higashi *et al.* 2020). A cross-scale perspective is invaluable for understanding organizational resilience, as the viability of organizations is intricately linked to the broader social-ecological systems in which they are embedded (Williams *et al.* 2019). Such a multilevel perspective is crucial for developing robust strategies for resilience, facilitating the identification of organizational strengths, weaknesses, and potential redundancies across diverse subcomponents (Wood *et al.* 2018).

2. Methodology

Interviews with members of the VFMA Alumni Association, Parents, and former Faculty were conducted. Thematic analysis was applied to transcripts of these interviews to identify recurring patterns and significant narratives related to the institution's operational decline (Higashi *et al.* 2020). A survey was also distributed among alumni and parents to gather quantitative data on perceptions of management effectiveness, financial stability, and academic quality over time.

The methodology for this study employed a mixed-method design centered on stakeholder perspectives to investigate the factors contributing to the closure of Valley Forge Military Academy. A total of 64 participants were recruited based on clearly defined inclusion criteria, specifically, individuals who were either teachers, alumni, or parents of former or current cadets, ensuring firsthand familiarity with institutional operations and culture. Data collection occurred through two primary modes: structured online surveys administered via Google Forms and follow-up semi-structured interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams. The questionnaire consisted of 30

multiple-choice items and 4 open-ended essay questions. An interview protocol, developed by the primary researcher using the Harvard University Program on Survey Research (PSR) Tip Sheet as a guiding framework, ensured consistency, clarity, and methodological rigor across all participant interactions.

Data analysis followed a structured thematic analysis approach. The process began with repeated readings of the raw interview transcripts and survey responses to establish deep familiarity with the dataset, followed by the generation of initial codes reflecting salient ideas and recurring patterns. These codes were then iteratively clustered into preliminary themes, which were refined through multiple rounds of review to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment with the overarching research questions. Credibility was strengthened through researcher triangulation, member checking with participants who volunteered to review interpretations, and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting analytic decisions. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout, including securing informed consent, ensuring confidentiality- especially vital given the hierarchical and tradition-bound culture of a military academy- and mitigating power dynamics by emphasizing voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time. The study also explicitly acknowledges limitations such as self-selection bias, possible constraints on candor due to institutional loyalty or concern for reputational harm, and uneven representation across stakeholder groups. These limitations are carefully considered in interpreting the findings and framing their broader implications.

3. Results

This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to VFMA's closure, triangulating qualitative insights with quantitative data to bolster the validity of the findings. The results elucidate the interplay between internal governance challenges and external market pressures that ultimately undermined the academy's operational viability and led to its closure (Higashi *et al.* 2020; Frisbie & Converso, 2016). Many of the respondents were noticeably irritated by the academy's pending closure. Some respondents referred to issues that could not be validated, such as specific debt amounts or the total number of scholarship dollars issued to students. This comprehensive analysis aims to provide actionable insights for other educational institutions facing similar challenges, emphasizing the critical role of adaptive strategies and robust organizational resilience in navigating periods of significant adversity (Ouédraogo & Boyer, 2012; Abdullahi *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to the broader literature on organizational decline and resilience, particularly within the context of private military educational institutions (Fernandez & Burnett, 2020; Heredia *et al.* 2022).

4. Discussion

The specific themes that respondents cited for the closure of Valley Forge Military Academy included managerial issues, economic pressures, and changes in societal values towards military education.

Based on data derived from surveys and interviews with parents, alumni, former cadets, faculty, and administrative staff, several interconnected factors were identified as contributing to the decline of the Valley Forge Military Academy (VFMA). Respondents consistently emphasized that declining enrollment served as a central driver of institutional instability. Stakeholders noted that by 2023 the cadet population had fallen to approximately 150, less than half of the enrollment recorded a decade earlier, and dramatically below the institution's mid-twentieth-century peak of more than one thousand students. This long-term downward trajectory weakened the academy's financial position and reduced its capacity to support core programs.

Participants furthermore highlighted rising operational costs and an increasingly unsustainable financial model. Tuition for boarding students had exceeded \$49,000 per year, a level regarded as prohibitive for many families. At the same time, insurance and liability expenses escalated sharply, particularly after changes in Pennsylvania law expanded institutional exposure. Numerous lawsuits alleging hazing, abuse, and sexual assault added substantial legal costs, which in turn prompted the academy to liquidate segments of its campus and other real-estate assets.

Survey and interview data also underscored the impact of legal pressures and reputational erosion. Respondents referenced multiple civil actions filed by former cadets, as well as a federal Title IX investigation that identified failures in reporting procedures and interference in the handling of complaints. These developments intensified liability risks and contributed to higher insurance premiums and insurer reluctance, further straining the academy's budget.

Concerns about governance emerged frequently in stakeholder accounts. Many interviewees criticized the board of trustees for micromanagement, insufficient strategic planning, and weak financial oversight. The frequent turnover of presidents and other senior leaders reportedly produced organizational instability. Several parents and

alumni cited decisions they regarded as ill-timed, such as the construction of a new presidential residence valued at approximately \$1.7 million, especially given the deferral of basic maintenance on academic buildings and other facilities.

The deterioration of the physical plant constituted another recurrent theme. Survey respondents described academic buildings in visible disrepair, with peeling paint, leaking roofs, and aging infrastructure. For many families, the condition of the campus was a significant deterrent and a symbol of broader institutional decline.

Stakeholders also noted that efforts to secure alternative revenue streams failed to generate the expected financial relief. Initiatives such as franchising the academy's brand overseas, including the creation of a Qatar campus, did not offset domestic losses; similarly, attempts to establish an on-campus charter school were unsuccessful. Land sales provided only temporary support and did not address the underlying structural issues. Neighboring Eastern University was viewed by some as aggressively seeking to purchase academy land.

Finally, several external environmental factors were cited as compounding the academy's challenges. Changes in Pennsylvania liability laws and rising insurance premiums, amplified by ongoing litigation, created a financial environment that many respondents characterized as increasingly unsustainable. Collectively, these findings indicate that VFMA's decline was not attributable to a single cause but to the convergence of demographic, financial, legal, organizational, and infrastructural pressures documented across stakeholder testimonies.

Outcome & Final Decision

In September 2025, the Board of Trustees decided the academy is no longer viable and announced that VFMA will close permanently after the 2025-26 academic year. VFMA will complete its last class (the 98th Corps of Cadets), while the associated *Military College* portion will continue operating under separate governance.

Conclusion

This multi-faceted decline, rooted in a confluence of micro, meso, and macro-level factors, ultimately led to the academy's closure, despite attempts to mitigate financial distress through measures such as asset sales and diversification efforts. The inability to adapt to evolving societal expectations for accountability and financial transparency, coupled with mounting legal and reputational damages, proved insurmountable, leading to the permanent cessation of its operations as a military academy (West & Yaghi, 2024; Downes, 2017). This case study underscores the significant vulnerabilities of small, private, tuition-dependent institutions to multifaceted pressures, resonating with broader trends observed across higher education (Bills, 2020; Johnson, 2021). The closure of institutions like VFMA highlights the critical need for robust governance, fiscal prudence, and a proactive response to legal and societal shifts to ensure long-term viability, particularly for specialized educational models (Muganga *et al.* 2024; West & Yaghi, 2024).

This study offers a novel and significant contribution by providing the first comprehensive, multilayered analysis of the Valley Forge Military Academy's closure, integrating institutional history, governance dynamics, financial data, and sociocultural change into a unified explanatory framework. While existing scholarship often treats school closures as outcomes of isolated financial or enrollment challenges, this case study demonstrates how intersecting legal, reputational, organizational, and societal pressures can converge uniquely within specialized institutions such as military academies. By situating VFMA's decline within broader patterns affecting private, mission-driven schools, the study not only illuminates previously underexamined vulnerabilities in this niche sector but also advances a more holistic model for understanding institutional fragility. In doing so, it provides an essential foundation for future research on organizational resilience and offers actionable insights for educational leaders navigating similarly complex and evolving landscapes.

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Special thanks are extended to the respondents who freely gave their time without compensation or expectation of reward. Their willingness to share candid and deeply reflective accounts of the organizational decline of an institution that held significant meaning for them was both generous and commendable. This study is strengthened by their honesty, commitment, and trust.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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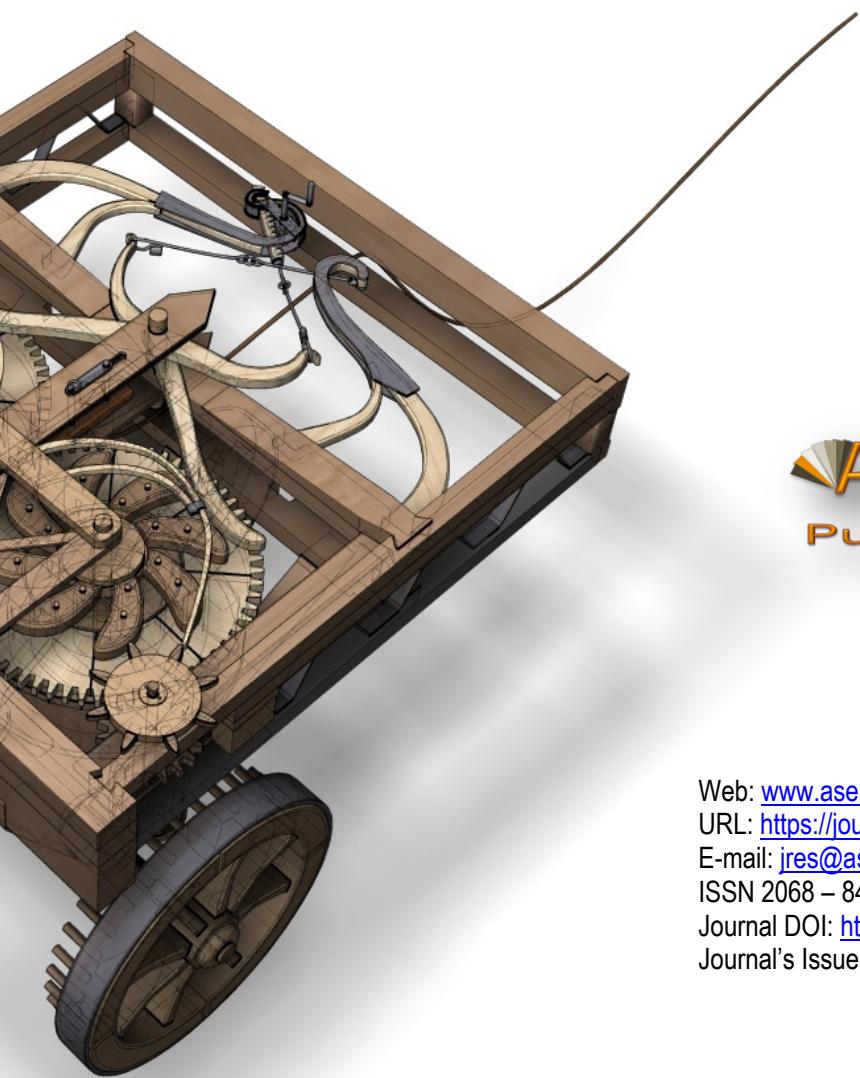
The author declares that he has not used generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process before submission.

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