

Eastern MA USAFA Families Club Grad Tips

Best Wishes to the EASTERN MA Class of 2017

MOST IMPORTANT PAGE- parent grad week information link:

<https://www.usafa.edu/superintendent/graduation/data/2017gradSchedule.pdf>

Graduation is coming soon for the USAFA Class of 2017. Best wishes from your Eastern MA USAFA Families Club. We have tried to put together some helpful hints for you. Remember that this is not a graduation from your Parents Club! You have a lifetime membership and you have a duty to give back to those who come after you. Please keep involved and stay in touch. Send your graduation hints to me so we can help those that will follow.

Best wishes!

Information from the USAFA web site can be found Under "Grad Parent week information": at:

<https://www.usafa.edu/superintendent/graduation/index.cfm?catname=graduation>

Detailed Information-The following 13 points are based on 100 pages of suggestions for GRADUATION. Do not feel compelled to do everything on this list. Pick and choose whatever fits you, your family/friends, and your Cadet. Again, subject to change from year to year.

THE OVERRIDING THEMES WERE:

1. BE EARLY!

Cannot be stressed enough! Early meant 1-2 hours before especially since you have to count on I-25 traffic; 100s of cars headed to the same place as you; all have to pass thru Security as do you; must park a distance away; wait for the shuttles. Especially if you need the handicap shuttle....Some suggested bringing picnic-type food for a tail-gate of sorts while you people-watch and meet others and see the frantic arrivals of those who didn't leave in time! Tell others in your group when to leave, making them responsible for getting themselves there. Don't try to herd your group.

The Academy has arranged for interesting things to happen pre-show, such as falconers walking around with the falcon or the Wings of Blue performing, etc. Great People watching and you can always take photos of your group.

2. HELP YOUR CADET MOVE OUT

Make sure your cadet is **packed and ready to sign out** right after Graduation. Cadets can't start too soon on this. Saw this mention numerous times. Some people had cadets bring some stuff to the hotel every night.

3. DRESS CODE

You will be sent information on appropriate dress for the different Grad Week events. Or you can find on the USAFA website under Graduation. Dress comfortably and appropriately. Plan layers of clothing and plan for cold, hot, and rain. Good, broken-in walking shoes. Casual clothes (polo shirts and slacks) for most things. Nice dress for the Baccalaureate and Supt's Reception and your best dress for the Graduation Banquet, Ball and Commissioning ceremonies. Hats, brims and sunscreen are a must. Bring lots of water with you. At the Graduation reception, long dresses for women, and suits or tuxes for men, mess dress for the military.

4. SCHEDULE/AGENDA/BOOKLET

Give family/friends a schedule/agenda and tell them to do what they want to do, be there early, they are responsible for getting themselves there, and the Grad days are ALL and ONLY about the cadet.

Provide an agenda/packet of info/letter to include—and send ahead to give them ideas on what to pack, what the dress code is, the significance behind some of the events, and seating arrangements for the group, and include the note from USAFA website asking for our cooperation in "insuring your guests wear appropriate attire" while at the Academy.

-Include maps of Colorado Springs, of the Academy Grounds, of the Cadet area, of the Stadium marking where your seats are for Graduation

-Give good directions and a list of phone numbers of people and places

-A copy of the USAFA Grad schedule and your own family's schedule

-Think about making copies of the Graduation brochure:

http://www.usafa.edu/superintendent/graduation/data/grad_brochure_2016.pdf (this should be updated shortly) to give to others in your group. It contains lots of info on security, dress suggestions, COS phone numbers, etc.

I wrote up a Code of Conduct which included Speak up for things, Pitch-in and make things better, Be honest about what you want to do (and not do), Be flexible, Be early.

One parent gave me this great phrase too: "Refrain from any political discussions, because no matter who is in the White House, that person is (Cadet's) boss. This week is a celebration of the USAFA cadets and their futures."

Be sure to give everyone in your party their tickets to all the events as soon as you can and get it off your mind!

From one parent: "Do what Your Cadet wants to do. Do what you want to do...don't let your family tell you what to do. Two weeks before send a packet to family and friends who are attending. The packet included phone numbers of all families attending (cell and home numbers), hotel addresses (including exit numbers and directions), hotel phone numbers and confirmation numbers, maps of COS and the Academy, a complete USAFA schedule of events and OUR schedule of events, with suggested departure times. She also compiled a list of "Things to Do in and Around the Springs" complete with phone numbers and reservation information. She explained that they were welcome to do any or all of the events, but they would need to be responsible for their coming and going...our job was to be with our cadet and celebrate with him...not to babysit the family!"

DO NOT OVER SCHEDULE, either. Leave time for rest, shopping, sight-seeing.

5. PHOTOS, PHOTOS, PHOTOS

Take Lots of Pictures of your cadet, with his/her friends, with family... and of the Academy (like the big screen at the Stadium). Especially at the Graduation Parade, as it will be one of the last times you will see your cadet in complete Parade Dress uniform (after Graduation, the white hat is gone!) Consider getting the professional photo taken that is offered after Commissioning. Also pick up post cards at the Visitor's Center.

6. "SITTING WITH YOUR CADET'S SQUADRON CAN GET UGLY"

Remember: you sit with your Cadet's squadron in specified sections and the Cadets get their diplomas as a squadron.

Several people commented on the rude behavior from the few who screamed and yelled when their cadets' names were announced, barring others from hearing their cadets' names, after a 4 year wait for Graduation. And making the "Graduation" photo shoot one of an unknown person's hands, buttocks, and posters blocking the view of the stage and any video recording is just one long horn-blast or scream.

One person pointed out that the entire squadrons' firsties' names are read in 2 minutes, or about 1 name every 3 seconds, which keeps the portion of the diploma handout to just over 1 hour. So, unless people settle down really quickly (fat chance!), multiple families miss out. The announcers do not pause for crowd noise.

Which makes me ponder even more about swapping tickets with another squadron family, and/or writing up a request to be passed out that suggests waiting until ALL of the squadron names are read before applauding those cadets and why.

(Also, please be considerate of others should someone in your group have very small children. A family with rambunctious children moved near mine, so not to disturb their family—but it is ok to be crying/whining/screaming around a stranger's family? Sometimes, children just aren't ready for a big deal like Graduation. I did ask them to move on and they did graciously.)

7. LIMITED MOBILITY/HANDICAP ADVICE

Reoccurring theme: Assign someone to take care of this person. Some people hired an attendant from their parents' nursing home to care take during the week—and the person loved being included and getting a chance to travel and it freed up the cadet mom to tend to other matters. Others assigned a sister or niece to do likewise. Another person hired a local person thru Comfort Keepers to tend to her mom all day during graduation.

-Remember to move slowly because of the thinner oxygen levels

-Have your cadet get a handicapped USAFA parking permit.

- Make sure your person brings the state-issued Handicap parking pass—even bring the license plate if you can't find the pass!
- Plan for bathroom breaks and ARRIVE EARLY!!!
- Handicap shuttles available on all the days except Graduation. In the stadium parking lot will be golf carts to shuttle handicapped guests. As well, there should be a drop-off near the stadium that morning.

For Graduation...

Handicapped seating is at the top of the “L” sections of the stadium and is limited. You can't get on the “L” level unless your ticket says so! 1/3 of the tickets will be on “L” for Lower, another 1/3 for “M” for Middle, and the remaining for “U” for Upper. The sections are assigned by Squadron Rank.

The top squadron gets the best seating, which is the middle of L while the lowest squadrons are in the nose-bleed section. You won't know your assigned seats until about a month out from Graduation.

Bring a portable chair for the ONE person allowed to sit with the wheelchair.

Scooters or power wheelchairs (and baby strollers) can't go into the stadium.

We sat in the M section and were relegated to the far ends because of “safety issues” with wheel chairs lining the top of the M section (best to be in M 1 or 2 with the wheelchair where the family member can see the TV-tron and it is closer to the Handicap parking in Lot #5).

On the positive, though, except for the Graduation seating, I did find that USAFA went way-out-of-its way to accommodate wheelchairs. We rarely waited very long for a handicap shuttle, the workers were gracious, the places close by, etc. Be sure to bring your state-issued mirror-hanger that denotes Handicap and you slip in easily. The only, the only disrespect was the M level seating for handicaps.

Suggestion: Use the cell phone to call a grandparent who can't come but can listen. One parent wrote: “We prepared Grammy ahead of Graduation. Told her that we would dial the phone and then we would NOT talk. She was to listen until we came back on the phone. She was not to assume we hung up. She heard <cadet's> name read loud and clear. Then we hung up. When the last squadron begun to receive their diplomas, we dialed again and let mom hear the last 4 events—about 10 more minutes. She heard the oath, the AF song, the “class dismissed” and the Thunderbirds roar....just make sure the phone is not pointing into the wind...”

Wheelchair rental places: Remember most will not be open on the Weekend or on Memorial Day. Some will deliver to the hotel (for an extra fee)

-Brady's Rental 719-596-6406

-Rocky Mountain Mobility 719-473-4088

Get RX for oxygen from home and fill at Apria Healthcare (Closed on weekends)

8. NEWS RELEASE to be sent to your area newspapers to run AFTER you return.

Include a photo and a self-addressed stamped envelope for return of photo (and hope you get it back)

Info to include about your cadet for a press release:

Your Cadet's Full Name

Your Cadet's Major and Minors

Your Cadet's Base Assignment and Future Plans

Your Cadet's Ranks (such as Squadron Commander...)

Your Cadet's Honors

Your Cadet's Extra-Curricular Activities

Your Cadet's Special Recognition

Your Cadet's Special Moments

Your Cadet's squadron and parents' names (maybe grandparents' names, too)

And anything you'd like to add

Note the date/place of Graduation.

((You can also add this info any booklet you may make up for your family/friends))

9. LOOSE-END SUGGESTIONS BEFORE COMING TO GRADUATION

-Check often the USAFA Website for updates.

-You might decorate your cars with large magnet boards and/or car paint.

-Bring your decorations from home, as COS will be cleared out of Red/white/blue and Graduation items.

-Plan to stock up on water and some essentials when you get there.

-Remember to get a Commissioning gift for the people who will commission your cadet and possibly for

your cadet's sponsor family and AOC, and any special cadet friends or roomies. (Ideas for Sponsor family gifts- Lahart USAFA gifts http://www.mlahart.com/US-Air-Force-Academy/Collectibles_19, dinner gift cards, nights at a time-share, fire pit, nice wine/scotch, mini-sabre with frame, Visa/MC gift cards, Commissioning keepsake)

-If you can, bring extra packing boxes since your cadet is issued only 4.

-Remind your cadet not to throw away any uniform parts until after Graduation, as some events, such as the Carlton house on Sunday, will require uniforms.

10. GIFT BAGS for those attending with you....we have listed quite a few items already. Here are some I don't remember if had been mentioned: Officers' Wives Cookbook, patriotic jewelry, buttons with your cadet's photo or squadron logo, fans, the words to the Oath of Office, wet wipes, disposable camera, deck of cards, mini-flags, AF note cards & pens, inflatable stadium seats, patriotic photo albums, things for younger children to do.

Things I am glad I included in the goodie bag: sunscreen, breakfast snacks, pom-poms, hand sanitizer, Chapstick, Kleenex, neck lavalier to hold ID, red beads (to match class year—people in my group loved wearing this!), squadron lapel pins (can get from the AOG at Parents Weekend or during Grad week—the men especially liked wearing these), sunglasses and a water bottle (someone suggested slapping a label on the bottle declaring "Congrats" to the cadet). The bag itself was a small knapsack in R/W/B—I do wish though I had made it bigger, or put all in a tote bag with the knapsack as an option.

I also shopped thru Oriental Trading Company for little, fun things like model glider planes, R/W/B fans, Sq 21 Black Jacks stuff, portable decorations for our family dinner, and more.

Have fun with things from your state, your cadet's squadron, the Class color or logo.

11. REMEMBER TO BRING WITH YOU:

-Anything mailed from USAFA, like the tickets, passes, letters....

-Your credit cards, AOG card, Health cards, travel cards... MONEY!

-Phone number of cadet, AOC and CQ just in case.

-Medicines, lotions, headache remedies (in your carryon)

-Charger for cell phone, cameras, camcorders, laptops, memory cards,

-folding chairs for tailgates or watching parades or flyovers, coolers

-Some office supplies (scotch tape, scissors, glue, pens, etc)

-Gifts, goodie bags, decorations

-Clothes! Toiletries and hats

12. LAST MINUTE THOUGHTS:

I am glad that we stayed until Monday after Graduation, since there were weddings to attend and we finally were able to vacation! Usually for PW, we rush in/out and really don't get to see much of Colorado. We stayed at a lodge that was rustic and wonderful. We liked having the run of the place with no other visitors or owner's scheduling. The concern about having an extra 20 minute drive past all the Near-Academy hotels vanished as we drove into the Pinelands and Mountains.

I wish I had bought earlier in my cadet's stay at the Academy more "Proud of My Cadet" type shirts, as it looks silly to wear them now that she is 2LT.

Remember your other children as well. Let them be special in some way during this week. My other daughter was very gracious and gave everyone Hawaiian leis which they wore willingly. She is attending the U of Hawaii.

For the Graduation Announcements, I collected from USAFA Day 1 all the names/addresses of people who had done special things for my cadet and did mail them a Grad card. In our Christmas letters, I urged all who thought they wanted to come to Graduation to commit, so I could commit for reservations (However, I did not commit any room deposit until I was sent the attendee's travel plans!). Then when ordering Grad photos, I could match the number with the # of Grad announcements I wanted to send out with extras for both. I mailed out 6 weeks prior the Grad Announcement, a Firstie photo, a list of cadet's accomplishments (see News announcement), and a thank you for their support.

I am glad that I ordered special Cigars and we gave them out at the Commissioning. I ordered from Eric/TBS-Cigars & Cigar Companies ebturner@TBS-Cigars.com He worked with me with a personalized Special Squadron Patch/Congratulatory message. ((I am not a smoker, but this is special!))

I consider my ordering of the R/W/B M&Ms a bust! Too much work to keep cool and not worth the \$80 for 15 lbs of candy. I did find in the Oriental Trading Company wrapped mints with both a R/W/B theme and a squadron theme. That worked better.

Do NOT think you have to order or do everything. Firstie parents are offered thousands of dollars of Graduation gifts to buy (from class pistol to class photo, from class painting to class watch, from souvenir this and souvenir that). Pick and choose what you want and when you do buy, keep a record of it in order to keep up with expenses and know when to expect it.

Same with all the suggestions you will read about Goodie bags, celebration dinners, outings, and so forth. Do what is right for your family and fits your cadet's personality. Every cadet who graduates will become a 2LT, regardless of all of the above and you don't have to have a huge entourage of people. These are only suggestions.

13. PLANNING TIMELINE

12 Months

- Reserve hotel rooms/rental homes
- Base ITT office can always book discounted hotels rentals for the following hotels: Choice hotels, Drury Inn, Fairfield Inn and Best Western. Call 719-333-7367 to book. They can also help with car rentals.

6-12 months

- Determine the size of the guest list
- Get a spiral ring notebook to keep your notes, musing, clippings, post-it notes, etc all in one place.
- Start an Accordion Fold with these Categories
- Check list of to-do items, Contacts, Travel, Schedule, Maps & Directions,
- Housing Contact Info, Suggestions, Restaurants/Banquets/Catering, Expenses,
- Guest info & travel plans, Don't Forget to Take list, Good To Know
- Keep a special place for all Correspondence from USAFA, including the tickets.
- Prepare "Save the Date" letters or magnets to mail out to invitees
- Mark the dates on calendars and planners
- Make a preliminary budget
- Make plane reservations
- Start planning reception/party
- Reserve hotel rooms- Send in deposits (if haven't already)
- Reserve restaurant(s) for your group
- Draw up Names and Addresses for Graduation Announcements (and keep in
- Contact section of Accordion Folder)
- Start compiling names and addresses of guests who are coming.
- Start looking for Travel Deals
- Order anything you might want special for your cadet, such as a flag flown over the capital, the class painting, the saber a/o gun...Keep a list of what you have ordered, from whom and how to contact later, cost and when to expect it.
- Begin looking for things to go in a gift bag/family

4 Months before

- Order announcements (get extras) The framed announcement with a spot for a grad photo is very nice.
- Order pictures (REMEMBER ENOUGH FOR GRADUATION NOTICES) (get extras)
- Order Things-to-do travel brochures from COS and CO

2 Months before

- Address invitations and announcements
- Finalize all details with hotel, reception hall, caterers
- Finalize travel details.
- Order graduation cake
- Arrange accommodations for out-of-town guests
- Send out tentative schedule, clothing suggestions (can get from USAFA website)
- Arrange for Wheelchair or babysitting

- Order T-Shirts/Caps/Gifts/Banners/Photo Buttons
- Order anything special or personalized (like Grad cigars)
- Get Commissioning gifts for those commissioning your cadet
- Think about any gifts for Sponsors, AOC, cadet's friends or roomies
- Order or collect anything for your gift bags for those attending

1 week before

- Draw up Meal Schedule and Menu plan and Grocery List
- Pack Gift Bags
- Send out Final Schedule and Reminders
- Contact Guests who have not responded
- Go over final details w/ all involved
- Buy film, smacks, sunglasses, sunscreen, etc
- Pack suitcases
- CHECK OVER CHECK-LIST TO DO and DON'T FORGET LIST
- Prep News Release to be sent to local newspaper upon your return
- Pack your bag of must-have-items, such as the car passes
- Pull together any cadet/party favors, decorations, graduation gifts, commissioning gifts, cameras/batteries/film or cards, office supplies, and duct tape!
- Make extra copies of passes, airline tickets, agendas, phone number lists, etc.

UPON ARRIVAL

- Some people hung posters on their hotel doors or inside their rooms, inviting people to write messages to the soon-to-be graduate. (I ordered mine from PB&J Signs email: signs@pbjsigns.com phone: (719) 785-4848 web: <http://www.pbjsigns.com> who did deliver to the hotel and was just under \$100—however, some people found local places, such as their own sign companies could do it for much less.)
- Start collecting the names and addresses of your cadet's friends, their cadet families', instructors, etc as you might not have any other way to contact them. The cadets' USAFA e-mail accounts end very soon after Graduation.

EVENTS

-Supt's Reception

Bring your own camera to the Carlton house for photos. Read the bios on the top brass people from the USAFA website, as they will be there to meet and greet.

-Attend the Parade Practice

Usually the day before the actual parade...this way you know where to sit the next day. Do a dry-run to where the Commissioning ceremony will be, so you will know the way and make sure the directions are correct. For the parades, bring a piece of plastic to place on the grass, if you can't sit in the stands. Squadrons 1-4 and 36-40 line up beyond the bleachers at the parades.

-Graduation Parade

Look for the little white flags on the Parade Field which will mark where the squadron firsties are to stand when they break away from the Cadet Wing in their last parade. Then sit in that section about 6-8 rows up so you can have a good look at the Parade and better photos of your cadet.

Plan to arrange to meet your cadet after any ceremony, either assign a meeting place or have your cadet to come to you! Your mass of look-alike T-shirts, hats, or neon poster boards can be the sighting point for your cadet. Find a good place to eat lunch where you can watch the Thunderbirds do a longer practice—do not pull over on the highway; you'll get a ticket. You might even tail-gate.

GRADUATION PARADE HINTS (Shared with permission- Kim Taylor)

- The graduation parade will be PACKED! I highly recommend you get there early! We were the first ones last year and of course had our pick of seats! We loved seeing the sunrise and just enjoying the ambiance of all things AFA on that beautiful morning! Watching the flag come up with taps was a real tear jerker.....
- Bring a big umbrella for the wait -- we certainly folded up the umbrellas once any sort of on-field activities started but they were a life-saver for sunburn! (it was sunny the whole time for us)

-Freeze water bottles overnight and bring them -- they will stay cold and you don't want to be standing in lines to fill them up at the water facilities once the parade activities start!

-Do NOT sit on the front row -- all the wheelchairs, strollers, etc. will totally block your view! Plus late arrivals will stand in front of you looking for seats (there won't be any!) and block your view.

-If you get there early and they don't have the ropes up yet, remember that both sides of the stands next to the center will be roped off for VIPs -- if you sit there early, you will be told to move when the ropes go up.

-Late arrivals will eventually sit in on the stairs next to you if you are on the end -- technically not allowed since it is a safety issue but the sheer numbers will overwhelm security police. If you are on the end, make sure you tell them they are NOT to stand up to take pictures when you are also trying to take pictures -- you were there first to ensure those great pictures and they need to be cognizant of that.

-When your cadet is marching away from the squadron and towards the stand, take LOTS of pictures -- once they get in place, they will pivot back toward the rest of the wing and then you just get the back of their heads.

-As soon as allowed, head straight out to the field and have your cameras ready -- your cadet will want pictures of their buddies and of course all your family and guests -- even if they whine, they will treasure the pictures forever so keep taking them! This is also your last chance to get pictures of them WITH their hats (as they throw them at graduation) so keep shooting those photos -- **and if you want a picture of them in their parade uniform with hat in front of their class crest on the wall up on the Tzo, this is also the time to walk up there and take it!**
(class crest comes down the next day)

-After the parade was also a good time for our cadet to take family and friends on a tour of the Academy grounds, show them their room, etc. Many of our guests were at USAFA for the first time and they were fascinated! Our cadet was probably in a million more pictures as they walked around the Tzo in those spiffy uniforms with their very proud family and guests!

-One other BIG HINT- Make sure your cadet is cleaning out their room and whittling down their belongings now -- they and you will be surprised how much stuff they have collected over the last four years! (and this includes males, not just females!) You do not want to be one of those panicked parents helping your cadet get everything out last minute when you should be enjoying the event and your guests! You will be shocked at how much cadets just throw out last minute since they are out of time and out of space (other younger cadets love it and call it treasure hunt time with all that is tossed or forgotten or just abandoned.....Again, congratulations!

-Commissioning

The one event where you only need to show up about 30 minutes prior to the ceremony but verify this with your cadet

USAFA Commissioning Ceremony Sequence of Events (Note: Squadrons will use this as a guide when organizing commissioning ceremonies. Ceremony takes approximately 60-90 minutes with 30 minute reception following.)

- Narrator opens ceremony with a welcome to the families and friends and a brief history of the commissioning ceremony; introduces DVs

- National Anthem

- Invocation (optional)

- AOC makes comments to graduates and families

- If a guest speaker is invited, he/she makes remarks

- Fifty-year Legacy Class Representative makes remarks

- Narrator calls graduates up on stage in alphabetical order, one at a time, accompanied by their commissioning officer

- Once the oath is administered, the narrator invites whoever the cadet has chosen to pin on their new rank to join them on stage

- As the cadet leaves the stage, Legacy Class Representative presents the graduate a

commemorative set of 2 Lt bars - Continue until all cadets have been administered the oath of office - Narrator concludes the ceremony, welcomes everyone to refreshments and offers the stage for family photos; cadets are reminded that they must remove 2Lt rank until after the graduation ceremony

- **Professional photographer** will be available either before or after commissioning ceremonies (usually in Arnold Hall) for portrait of cadets with 2 Lt Bars with their guests. These are really nice to have.

-Graduation

- Be sure to get photos of your cadet BEFORE Graduation, as afterwards, they will no longer have their white hats and they start peeling off their uniforms. Be sure to get the local newspapers the day of and the day after Graduation.
- Get someone else to video tape the Commissioning and Graduation. Pack a tailgate dinner to enjoy while waiting for the Graduation traffic to clear out and use your cell phone to contact others in your group where to park so you can be in the same vicinity as you dine together.
- Send someone ahead to the stadium to secure your assigned seats, as some people will ignore the ticket assignments.
- Rent the stadium seats (\$5 each)
- If you have to leave immediately after Graduation, park as far away from the stadium as you will be allowed, the north side is best. No one can leave until after the T-bird performance, about 1:30pm.
- Allow your cadet time away from family to say good-bye to good friends.
- While the Stadium announcements say "no Tailgating," I'd tell you that unless the PTB get the traffic fixed, figure out something to do for 2 hours after Graduation. It took me nearly an hour to get out of the parking lot (in 05, I even waited an hour before getting into my car and still had an hour's wait!). This year, the car didn't even move one inch for 45 minutes. I saw people with those portable tents enjoying themselves, while hundreds of cars were blocked from even moving.

Other notes from club parents:

From Betsy, Class of 2016 parent:

Enjoy every second. Our motto was: do as much as you can, as this is a once-in-a-lifetime event. While we used this document as our bible, we do have a few things to add that were not mentioned previously.

1. Remember that even though the schedule you have (the one on the graduation website) may show some down time, do not expect to spend that time moving or being with your grad. The grads have out-processing and both commissioning and grad practices to attend during that time, ie your schedule will not necessarily align with your cadet's.
2. Unlike other grad events, you only need to be at the commissioning ceremony about 30 minutes ahead of time (not the usual 1.5 hours). Since the ceremonies are spread out, there is not a backup at the gate or much traffic. We did not see many men in tuxes, mostly suits and ties.
3. Highly recommend attending the formal reception in Mitchell Hall. It is very well done with carving stations, pasta stations, appetizers (shrimp galore), two beautiful huge cakes and a cash bar. This was a nice way to celebrate the occasion without a lot of hassle and the price is very reasonable.
4. While the ball in Arnold Hall is fun, I would recommend it mostly for grads and their guests only if the grad has a date with which to dance.

Looking beyond graduation, I highly recommend you plan to hire your own movers to move your grad's things from home (they do not have this choice for their things at the Academy, unless they move it themselves). The military will reimburse most, if not all, of the cost. The summer is the peak moving season thus the goods moved via the military movers may not arrive when you want them to. You will have more control over the arrival date if you arrange for movers yourself. We did not know this could be done and our grad was in his apartment for at least a week without his stuff.

From Stacey, Class of 2014 parent:

Congratulations parents! What an exciting time. There is a ton of information out there for you but here are a few tips I would like to share.

- Make your hotel reservations as soon as you can. For us it was the day after the previous year graduated. Most hotels have a different cancellation policy during graduation so be sure you know what the latest date is to cancel rooms so you do not get stuck with charges.
- Lots of people bring signs to hang outside their rooms congratulating their graduate. We did not do this as our son would not have liked it but I will say it was very cool to be in the hotel lobby and see all the signs hanging over the rails. Bring zip ties if you are going to do this.
- We spent two weeks in COS using the time as tourists. You will not get to see your cadet as much as you would like but we had a great time with family and friends. We did have our son bring us stuff from his room every time

we saw him. They have to be totally out of their rooms three hours after graduation so do not leave this for the last minute. They will have collected a ton of stuff over four years.

-We had a large group and sometime in March our son called and asked for five social security numbers. This is for clearance purposes. Five of us were cleared so everyone else had to come on base with us. If you do not know social security numbers get them so you can pass them on when the paper work needs to be done.

-We choose to have a Pre-graduation tail gate breakfast in the parking lot. It was great fun. We were all together and we were less stressed. We arrived on campus when the gates opened in a caravan of cars. This was the best piece of advice I was given by an upper class parent. It gets crowded so being there early reduced the stress and you do not want to miss a moment.

Speaking of moments- you will have many. You will most likely not be able to pick out your son or daughter during the March On of graduation. But when they get their diploma try to follow them to their seats. Then after they toss their hats, look down to where your child is sitting. This was an amazing moment. You won't necessarily see your child but the emotion and pride of the moment was awesome. Let someone else be in charge of pictures and buy the graduation DVD. It is worth it. Also stay seated after it is over as there is no rush to get out the parking area. It is a mess. Arrange with your son/daughter to come find you in the bleachers. It will be much easier.

Class of 2011 Parent:

Most of what we are doing is pretty much along the lines of what he wants to do. We are all going to the ball, 7 year old brother to 70 something Nana. If you have a family member who is active duty or retired officer, they may be able to swear in your cadet. My advice would be to take your cues from your cadet.

Another Helpful Hint

We had some family/friends attending graduation so we had a party after. Things were up in the air for some time so it was very late when I contacted a restaurant for the event. Luckily someone canceled and we were able to get their spot. Our son had to take care of some things and get everything moved out of his room so we booked it for around 5:30 PM.

If you are keeping a scrap book for your child, buy the paper Colorado Springs and Denver newspaper the day after graduation. We were very lucky to have a picture of our son in the paper. Most of all, just enjoy. It was an incredible experience for our whole family and our friends.

Another Suggestion:

It was important for me that we attend Mass on Sunday so we arrived on Saturday. We then looked to our graduate to see what events he wanted to attend. The reception at the Superintendent's House (Carlton House) was interesting but it does take up several hours. We stood on line to meet the superintendent and have pictures taken. There is a light reception. The rest of the time we did sightseeing with our other children. We stayed at the Drury Inn which we booked right after graduation the year before. They had a block of rooms set aside for graduation. We were able to reserve as many rooms as we wanted without prepaying. They had a nice breakfast in the morning and a light dinner with drinks in the evening. Everyone was very happy with the hotel. We left early for all events and had no problems with traffic.

From an older graduating Cadet:

While it's been nearly a decade since I attended graduation in 2003 and I have not posted to this group in years, I feel compelled to reply. I would not trade the graduation parade or baccalaureate memories for anything. The Graduation Parade is a rite of passage in which the honor of leading is passed down from the seniors. In my son's opinion, this was the most important event other than graduation.

The baccalaureate is an event that only I wanted to attend, and ended up being one of the most important and, although he heartily disagreed with attending, he thanked me after the fact and it was one of the most appreciated by my son. The coolest of the Generals spoke while the attendees shared in the calm of the chapel to both reflect on a hard four years full of unforgettable accomplishments, and look forward with to a career of note - by hearing the General's perspectives, war stories and career as an inspiration. It was also a nice opportunity to see and meet classmates and parents.

One other tip - my son was going to discard all his cadet uniforms. I saved some representative items which he has since thanked me for, which look cool next to the Navy uniforms that I also saved. He decided to discard or give away of all his books which he has always regretted.

From Jack B:

First and foremost, I would strongly urge you to be sure to involve your cadet with all of your plans for the time you and your group of family and friends are in Colorado Springs in advance of your arrival. By that I mean, get the "official" Graduation Week Schedule at the AFA's web site and do a day by day, event by event, review with your cadet. They may not have definite plans as yet, but they need to know that you want to work together to come up with an itinerary that will work for all of you. In addition to the events that they are required to attend, there will be optional events that they may or may not want to attend. Or, you may find you wanted to attend an optional event, but perhaps your cadet doesn't. Good idea to figure that all out well in advance.

In view of the mandatory and optional events, you'll want to also understand the plans they have made for themselves during the time that you are there that may or may not include you and your family/friends. Additionally, you may want to make some decisions on things such as: Will you be having a party/celebration for your grad during your time in COS? What kind of "party?" Dinner at a restaurant for just family and friends only, or reserving a room at a restaurant and having an open-house catered type of party for family, friends and your grad's pals? We did a bit of both.

Our son's sponsor parents and his best pal's sponsor parents were next door neighbors so we had an all afternoon/evening "open yard" BBQ/Cookout/Clambake between the two homes with grills running all day. We rented and put up a couple of sun canopies, tables, chairs, volleyball nets, badminton nets, etc. We had cadets stopping by during that time and many brought their families along. It was terrific to be able to meet everyone. During the day, our son and other cadets would leave for an hour or so to head over to another cadet's cookout/party or to a fellow cadet's restaurant function. We also went to a couple of parties/dinners of the cadets we knew. For us, it was a great day. So figuring out what will work for you, your grad and your guests is important. Some families opt not to do anything in COS and to have that party when their grad gets home. It's all about what works for you.

Again, it is really important for you to keep in mind that your grad is planning an itinerary for what they want to do with their close cadet friends also. Sometimes parents lose sight of the fact that in many cases this is a last hurrah for your grad with many of their classmates with whom they have spent most every day for the past 4+ years. Be sure to get an idea of what is in your cadet's plans and don't be surprised or disappointed if they want to head off to parts unknown to visit other cadets and their families during these few days. These relationships have been forged over the 4 long years of working together, having fun together, and depending upon each other to make it through. They'll want to share this time with each other in their own way as much as they want to spend time with you.

For family and friends that have accompanied you, have an itinerary planned and printed for them. Be sure to share everyone's cell phone numbers in advance. Put an itinerary together for them that lets them know when and where you will be at an event and let them know what the appropriate dress is for each event (see the on line AFA website's schedule for dress requirements.) Get maps together on how to get to the events and where you will meet at each event. Do NOT take the responsibility for making sure that everyone gets to where they need to be. If folks didn't arrive at the agreed upon place at the agreed upon time – tell them to call to let you know they will or won't be there so you're not distracted, keeping an eye on the door waiting for them to enter. I simply and politely let our group know, that this is a once in a lifetime event for us, and I was not missing anything waiting for others to arrive or to be picked up. You truly want to enjoy these events. Most of us only do this once!

Be as organized as you can and have the family and friends there with you understand, that getting to events is their responsibility not yours. Involve your grad in the planning for your time at the Academy and be understanding when s/he needs to take some time to be with friends that won't include you. The way I looked at this was, this was THEIR time. "They" earned this – all the cadets – We were there to bear witness and to share the experience with them. Have a wonderful time and take LOTS of pictures & video.

