Aircraft, shooting stars, and planets are visible from the flight deck of the Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan as it transits the Luzon Strait, 1 July 2016. (Photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Ryan McFarlane, U.S. Navy)

Mandatory Education

A New Paradigm to Improve the NCO Corps

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All know the Way; few actually walk it.

– attributed to Buddhist teaching

Imbalance has become the status quo within the Army. On one side is bureaucratic rationalization, on the other, individual professionalism. An imbalance of bureaucracy over professionalism instantiates a myopic viewpoint whereby routinization of bureaucratic processes issues an inhibitory and insensitive element to the development of professionalism that serves a necessary counterbalance to the system itself.[1] Counterarguments may well cite the constant mandatory training on various aspects of ethical comportment within the Army. What is missing in this counterargument is the critical thinking component and individual accountability through higher education found lacking in the routinization of myriad requisite training programs within the Army system. This paper does not intend to reduce bureaucratic elements within the Army in favor of professionalism. Rather, the introduction of mandatory education within the NCO Corps can better facilitate an appropriate balance between the two extremes. Harmony between bureaucracy and individual professionalism utilizes relative

strengths, such as NCO potential, rather than maintaining the status quo of increasingly caustic differences. Achievement of this balance inculcates a renewed sense of ethics, modernization, and adaptability within the Army culture and NCO ranks.

This paper argues for shifting higher education in the United States Army from voluntary choice to mandatory requirement for advancement within the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps. Doing this will enable the Army to meet the dynamic threats of the modern world and provide an adaptive, diverse, and sustainable force of citizen soldiers. This paper argues that mandatory education within the NCO Corps will improve the Corps, and by extension, the Army as a whole. Mandatory education for the NCO Corps improves professionalism, career stability, moral behavior, and national security requirements. Mandatory NCO higher education has the potential to create a ground-up change to Army culture.

Analysis

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Independent Task Force Report on education and national security evaluated the education outcomes United States' kindergarten to twelfth-grade (K-12) in relation to other nations. The CFR report illustrated the significance of education relative to national security capabilities. CFR analysis concluded the skill sets needed for successful integration in a globalized society are lacking for both civilian and military vocations. Appropriate skills needed for vocational demands of intelligence and military service suffer ability deficits throughout a student's education lifecycle in the U.S.'s public school system.[2] Independent data also shows high percentages of U.S citizens' lacking the basic skills required for military service.[3]

CFR analysis showed military and intelligence-based language skills notably deficient in the current wartime environment.[4] This implies an intelligence gap among young U.S. students relative to global peers in making the transition from public education into military service. Perpetual education weaknesses in the American education system eventually affect vocations involving national security through limited qualified personnel for military service. Specifically, key intelligence vocations within national security communities suffer chronic issues of sub-standard performance and low numbers of personnel despite high demand. Education systems thus serve as a clear link between national security and military service.

Education is also an effective gauge of professionalism. Don M. Snider offers a pessimistic yet currently realistic outlook for the Army in his discussion of the twofold nature of the Army: professional and bureaucratic.[5] The Army is currently undergoing a force reduction that tends to favor a bureaucratic approach to plan management and mission execution. Historically, the unbalanced bureaucratic tendency of the Army over time has cultivated a climate trending towards a character-based deficit of professional, moral, and trustworthy leaders. Snider includes education within the professionalism category.[6] Snider's characterization of the professional and bureaucratic dichotomy reveals a common link between education, professionalism, and jobs of national security.

Snider also points to low levels of moral character and trust among Army leaders, citing recent situations of sexual harassment and issues of ethical comportment among the ranks.[7] Ultimately, Snider predicts the Army of 2025 will face significant challenges to generate and sustain competent leaders of moral character in an overly bureaucratic system.[8] A relationship between morality and education needs to be established to address the issues raised by Snider as we consider the value of mandatory education for the NCOs Corps.

Fortunately, there is a relationship between moral development and higher education. Pursuance of higher education tends to improve moral judgement. Patricia M. King and Matthew J. Mayhew have found significant improvement of moral judgement at the collegiate level.[9] Social diversity analysis and discussion are highly effective in improving overall moral behavior, two essential techniques in the collegiate classroom.[10] A common thread

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emerges between the variables of education, national security, morality, and current issues within the Army. How then, can one apply these associations and observations to improve the NCO Corps?

Higher education should be mandatory for NCOs. I recommend the Army require an associate's degree for advancement from sergeant to staff sergeant. Staff Sergeant to Sergeant First Class should require a bachelor's degree, and a mandatory master's degree to obtain a Master Sergeant's level of responsibility. In so doing, the following benefits and consequence will be observable in the Army and NCO Corps.

Cost/Benefit Analysis: Financial

The Army's financial investment in adopting this change is minimal. Current tuition assistance (TA) policy and funding will remain in effect and apply to all available personnel. The only significant change is addressing any out of pocket expense for education costs beyond the limitation of TA (currently at $250 per semester hour and $4500 per fiscal year).[11] As such, any financial remainder on TA coverage, which would mostly apply for the E-7/E-8 group, would deduct from that individual's Post 9/11 GI Bill balance. Should the NCO desire to maintain the entire balance of his or her Post 9/11 GI Bill, they may opt to pay out of pocket at their discretion. Those who have transferred education benefits to dependents may still have deductions taken under their dependent's account or assume the financial obligation. A further option, if it is determined to be a worthwhile use of resources, is to increase TA benefits based on NCO rank and/or have a tax-free TA offset allowance at a set rate for all ranks.

Implementation of this change requires a mandatory investment of time, which will provide more of a challenge than expense. Soldiers, NCOs, and command should have a set time, preferably on a training day (for example, dividing Sergeant's Time Training (STT)) to work on higher education advancement. This privilege is at the discretion of command teams and not intended to apply to other facets of education, such as correspondence courses or separate mandatory unit training requirements. Deployed service members should have reasonable time given to support this change in their career structure.

Cost Analysis: Benefits

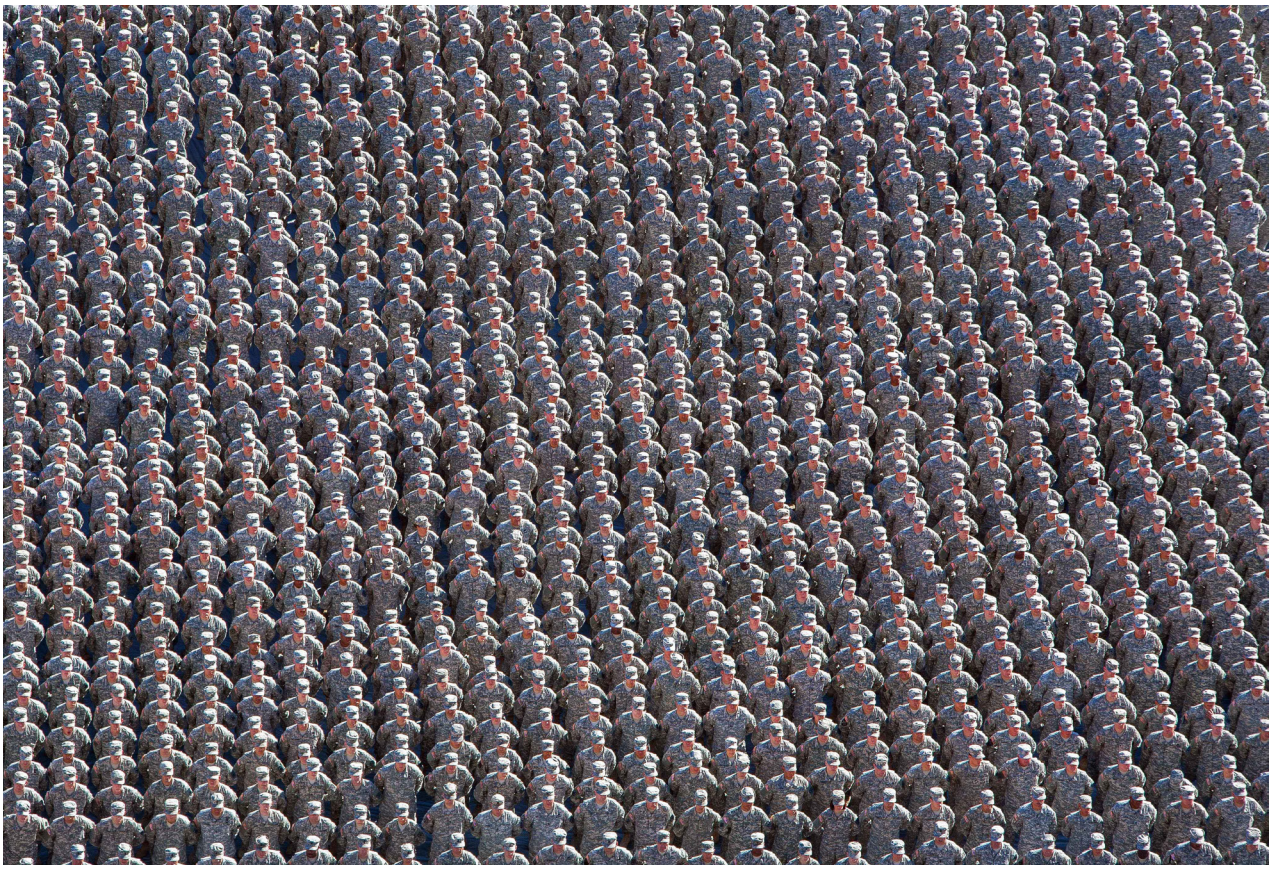
First, the NCO Corps will improve the quality of its human capital. A diverse pool of disciplinary knowledge among well-educated personnel increases the intellectual base of any workforce. For the Army, such a workforce can more readily meet highly demanding and technical standards required within sensitive areas of responsibility, notably among intelligence fields. Further, NCOs who separate from military service with a strong education background will continue to support the nation's workforce in civilian sectors.

Second, NCOs will have an improved level of moral behavior. The NCO Corps will continue to lead by example with the benefit of improved moral judgement attained through exposure to higher education. This scenario mitigates the critique offered by Snider and will foster improved morality among the NCO Corps. This improved morality will likely spread throughout Army culture due to the unique placement of NCOs within command chains. The NCOs' improved moral base will expose enlisted soldiers and officers to a dependable example of professional conduct.

Third, a well-educated NCO Corps establishes intellectual resilience among the Army during reductions in force. Mandatory education among NCOs ensures a needed resource remains in place despite changes in force size and structure. This enables competent mission accomplishment without compromising force strength in subsequent NCO generations. An added benefit of this process is the retention of NCOs willing to meet the education requirement. The status quo perpetuates disinterest in higher education in favor of less-substantive career attributes. This leads to over-specialization and fragmented promotion eligibility rather than a balanced approach to the Army profession developed through dedicated higher learning.

Fourth, higher education will improve critical thinking within the NCO Corps. Snider notes the Army currently suffers from transactional leadership.[12] Transactional leadership is detrimental due to its often-sycophantic contexts and reward-based approach that manifests too often in today's Army. Increased development and use of critical thinking among NCOs due to mandatory higher education will mitigate transactional leadership's toxic effect. More developed critical thinking skills will result in improvement in leadership quality among the NCO Corps.

Fifth, mandatory education will streamline career transition from NCOs to officers. Officer candidates require collegiate education. Leadership transition in the Army simplifies with the implementation of mandatory education for NCOs. Persistent resources of educated



Arizon National Guard soldiers from the 158th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade stand in a mass formation 7 December 2014 on the field at Arizona State University's Sun Devil Stadium, Tempe Arizona, during the Arizona National Guard Muster and Community Expo. (National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Brian A. Barbour)

personnel will be more readily available for the officer ranks. In time, generations of competent leaders with improved moral behavior may spread throughout the Army, originating from the NCO Corps.

Sixth, higher education as a common denominator will balance the Army for its current and future needs. It avoids over-specialization to permit greater tactical, operational, and strategic flexibility within the Army. An NCO will no longer be able to justify promotion eligibility with extensive military experience alone. Likewise, a well-educated NCO can no longer over rely on his or her educational background to serve as a distinguishing characteristic for promotion. Thus, both extremes of the NCO Corps will have to focus on improving their weaknesses. This will not only improve the NCO Corps, but will lead to a more adaptable force.

Cost Analysis: Consequences

What follows are potential consequences for the NCO Corps if the Army rejects mandatory education. First, the status quo will remain in place. Snider's pessimistic prediction in his critique of Army professionalism has better chances of becoming reality. This will result in stagnant force progression and leadership development. Negative character issues involving moral/ethical behavior and beneficial leadership climates will persist.

Second, failure to adopt the mandatory higher education requirement is a possible misuse of resources. Education benefits provided to NCOs by the Army are available on a voluntary basis. Maximum return on investment with the education benefits provided is only possible through a mandatory education requirement. Time, services, and money disappear for the Army if there are not enough claims for benefits allowed. In addition, civilian earning potential generally increases with respective levels of higher education. Today's higher education mirrors concepts of globalization facing state actors today.[13] This includes increased demographic and intellectual diversity regarding human capital and is simultaneously applicable to the need to avoid over-specialization in this specific argument. Additionally, higher education

incorporates training requisite skill sets beneficial to the individual and the state in science, technology, and economic fields. Many of these skills directly or via related sub-disciplines prove inherently valuable to a modern military force. The Army potentially does a disservice to the nation by not mandating higher education among its NCOs and future civilian workforce.

Counterarguments

As previously mentioned, the Army Officer Corps requires higher education. Despite this, moral deficiencies among the Officer Corps can and do exist. How then, can a legitimate claim supporting the improved moral climate of the NCO Corps through higher education exist? First, mandatory higher education among the NCO Corps is not a panacea for moral and ethical recalcitrance. Specifically, it is a proposed change that holds a broad spectrum of beneficial attributes, one of which may ameliorate, to a certain extent, moral comportment in junior enlisted ranks. Generally, the status quo regarding ethical and moral problems *relative* to the other assertions made in this paper further support the inclusion of higher education from a macro perspective. At the very least, mandatory higher education among the NCO Corps is a proposed step in a better direction. In other words, raising the intellectual obligation of the lowest common denominator has independent improvement metrics eventually influencing Army culture over time.

The second counterargument to this paper's claims regards mandatory higher education's dynamic range. Any proposed change should require the correct amount of scrutiny. Having said mandatory education is not a universal solution to problems within the NCO Corps, how can this change truly modify the Army culture to produce its hypothesized results? Alterations brought through gradual modification of normative values and expectations will illustrate change in a group's environment over time. Two considerations, the desire for positive change and its implementation, provide the impetus for such change to manifest its appropriateness or need of further modification. Regarding the proposed benefits of mandatory higher education, its inception among the NCO Corps will either validate this paper's claims or negate it. In either context, the status quo by comparison serves less as a valid refuge for the unconvinced than as a starting point for an improved course of action.

Conclusion

This paper hypothesized mandatory education will improve the NCO Corps. Initial evidence presented shows a link between a well-educated workforce, national security, and improved moral behavior. Higher education forms a symbiotic relationship between positive leadership development and career progression. Thus, the Army and the nation are in a unique position to place the needs of itself and the individual in the same category. Simply required is the courage to embrace positive change that mandatory higher education for NCOs can bring. In so doing, the military and the nation achieve greater strength and professionalism by the backbone of the Army, the NCO Corps. ■

Notes

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11. Snider, "Professionalism and the Volunteer Military," 40, 45.

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