

# The Challenge and Opportunity of Scholars Programs at the Command and General Staff College

## One Example

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### Abstract

This article examines the purpose for creating scholars' programs at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). It discusses the CGSC Art of War Scholars program as an example of a successful CGSC scholars program, the elements of the program, the qualities and performance of the scholars and graduates, and how the program meets the intent of current Army and joint professional military education initiatives. This article clarifies the characteristics of the Art of War Scholars program and the joint and combined leaders that it develops.

One of the critical issues for the Department of Defense as it evolves strategic landpower to meet the needs of the 21st century is the intellectual ability of leaders to meet both the demands of a complex international operating environment and the changing character of warfare. In a time of potentially austere national security budgets, the mental software, or intellectual capacity, of the leaders of the land force is critical to sustaining readiness over the long term as great-power competition reemerges. Murray and Millett (2000) compared the present with peacetime inflection points in the past where leaders had to adapt their individual education to stay current, despite shortages of equipment or lack of training. The American Army's school system in the interwar years helped to prepare officers for the rigors of global combat in World War II, even while the size of the force, its readiness, and modernization dwindled. One of the key components of that education system was the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), which was critical to the development of midgrade officers' intellectual capacity.

Officers attending the Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) at CGSC at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, come from a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience who represent an Army multibranch, joint, and combined population. Whatever background officers have coming into the course serves as the bedrock of their professional military education for the second half of their careers, until they either retire or attend senior service college. While the standard curriculum meets the needs of the vast majority of officers, there is a small group of officers who arrive at the college desiring to do more, to learn more, and to enable their performance during their field grade years.

Many readers may not be aware that since 2010, the CGSC has offered a series of scholars' programs designed to meet the professional development needs of the officers who desired something more from the intermediate-level educational experience. This alternative approach to education has taken a variety of forms and evolved over time based on the needs of students and the availability of faculty. The basic idea of all the scholars programs was to allow students to develop expertise in focused areas and to conduct in-depth research into areas beyond those afforded in the standard CGSOC curriculum. The Army needs a capability for officers to conduct research in the operational arts, and this research should be informed by professional practitioners. Officer students involved in this research can reach a depth of knowledge on important operational issues and increase their ability to solve tough problems. The Army benefits by the growth of these officers in their contributions to the body of knowledge of the military profession. The officers benefit in their personal development of critical thinking and demonstrated research abilities.

The CGSC Scholars program meets the need for a program where officer students can do more to accomplish research into the operational art or the current operating environment. Each seminar is directed by a highly qualified CGSC faculty member with the special expertise in the topic under consideration. Seminar design and conduct come under the supervision of the leadership of the college, with the dean as proponent. The focus is always on the educational development of the students.

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Publication of research findings is important but is secondary to the design and implementation of each scholar's seminar to investigate the chosen subject field.

Some of the CGSC Scholars course offerings offered since 2010 include

- ◆ **Art of War.** This course began with a counterinsurgency focus and later transitioned to understanding operational art and strategy across the spectrum of conflict. This course will be described in some detail below.
- ◆ **The Local Dynamics of War.** This course examines how to develop workable interventions that involve lethal power, governance, economics, ethics, and culture.
- ◆ **Homeland Security.** This course is a case study focused on southwest border security.
- ◆ **National Intelligence Studies.** This course is a focused elective on contemporary intelligence issues and is directed by the chair of National Intelligence Studies.
- ◆ **Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention.** This course addresses historical cases to identify nations on the path to genocide or mass atrocities.
- ◆ **Warrior Logistician.** This course requires a graduate degree in business in global supply chain management from an affiliated university.
- ◆ **West Africa/Liberia Strategic Study.** This focused elective course provides the opportunity to conduct an in-depth study on a real-world issue and to provide recommendations to decision-makers.
- ◆ **Irregular Warfare.** This course is focused on the development of adept irregular warfare planners for interagency, joint, and special mission assignments at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

All of these studies involved a small number of selected students for a specific and confined period. The studies exposed the selected scholars to experts in their field and offered the opportunity for individual research. Over time, most of these programs ceased when the faculty expertise required to sustain them moved on. Despite the reduced number of active programs, the CGSC Scholars concept proved to be adaptive to changing operational environments and warfighting requirements. A new scholars program titled Information Warfare Scholars is under development with command guidance to account for new warfighting domains, joint and Army concepts, and the criticality of cyber operations and big data. The CGSC Scholars concept continues to be relevant.

This article describes the Art of War Scholars program. This program has existed since the inception of the CGSC Scholars program, has evolved, and continues presently. The specifics outlined here illustrate the potential of all CGSC scholars programs, whether past or future. Many of the course dynamics and considerations are the same. The basis of this article is the author's eight years of experience in writing and revising the curriculum of the Art of War Scholars program, monitoring the Art of War Scholars' successful completion of a hundred master's theses, publishing dozens of those findings as articles and Art of War papers, and tracking the postgraduation professional development and career success to the level of each assignment of each Scholar graduate.

The Art of War Scholars program offers a small number of selected officers a chance to participate in intensive, graduate-level seminars and in-depth personal research focused primarily on understanding strategy and operational art through modern military history. The purpose of the program is to produce officers with critical-thinking skills and advanced understanding of the art of warfighting. These abilities are honed by reading, researching, debating, and writing about complex issues across the full spectrum of modern warfare, from the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War through village-level counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, with an eye to the future evolution of the art of war. All Art of War scholars complete a Master of Military Art and Science (MMAS) thesis, and the development of this thesis through primary source research and publishable-quality writing is the foundation of the program.

The main theme for the seminars is the art of warfighting based on the analysis of the history of warfare. The variety of seminars in the curriculum includes capstone doctrine with direct engagement of doctrine writers, organizational-level leadership, national strategy, visits to key combined arms agencies and selected archives, observation of a mission command training seminar, and a series of staff rides. The Art of War scholars enjoy the daily opportunity to engage distinguished art of war “practitioners,” noted historians, and combined arms leaders. There is normally a distinguished guest for every seminar. Blocks of instruction include national ways of war, total war, doctrine, Cold War, counterinsurgency theory and experience, art of command, and current experience. There are approximately 100 graduate-level seminars in this curriculum, each with an intensive preparatory reading load.

The Art of War seminar is composed of up to 12 scholars and is directed by the college’s Ike Skelton Distinguished Chair for the Art of War. The program begins upon the completion of the common core curriculum and takes the place of the Advanced Operational Warfighting block and the elective periods. The selection process to be an Art of War scholar is highly competitive, requires written application, and considers academic performance in the core curriculum. The recommendation of the staff group advisor, team leader, and thesis chair is required. The selection process carefully assesses the potential for the prospective scholar to complete a high-quality thesis and to daily support the graduate-level discussion of the scholar’s seminar. Screened candidates are interviewed and selected by a board of CGSC leaders. Experience shows that those officers who are selected perform without exception to the high level of scholarship and professionalism expected of them. Graduates of the program perform their field-grade duties to the exceptional quality required for promotion to lieutenant colonel and selection for battalion command.

Graduates of the program receive a unique perspective on senior leadership, national ways of war, national and military strategy for a variety of national cultures, current Army doctrine, campaign planning, the problems of innovation and adaptation on

the modern battlefield, and the complex linkages between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. Graduates will be uniquely prepared for entry into the School of Advanced Military Studies or selection to later competitive fellowships, and a variety of future assignments demanding strategic, operational, and command capability. Given the expected level of scholarship for Art of War theses, the Ike Skelton distinguished chair automatically considers them for publication as an Art of War paper. Published Art of War papers are available at the Army University Press website for use by professionals across the force in solving difficult operational issues or in understanding complex historical context. Reaching these goals of personal and professional development fulfills the purposes outlined in the original concept papers by the deputy commandant of CGSC, and dean of academics for CGSC Scholars programs.

The opportunity for these scholars to qualify for selection to the Advanced Military Studies program, the Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy program, the secretary of defense's Strategic Thinkers program, or other additional funded graduate-level education or senior service college fellowships is one of the purposes and advantages of this program (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College [CGSC], 2016). This is an environment wherein many defense senior leaders desire to develop additional officers with PhD degrees so that they are able to engage civilian leaders coherently on complex national security issues. Eventually, these officers capable of strategic thinking may naturally rise to be capable joint task force commanders who adapt and lead in the evolving joint operational environment. Officers develop both the initial skills and the confidence to continue to pursue such difficult endeavors and reach the limits of their great professional potential.

### **Why Such a Program?**

The basic premise behind the CGSC Scholars programs and the Art of War Scholars program itself is that for each CGSC course there are a small number of highly motivated officers who simply want more from their staff college experience and are willing to invest significant time and effort to achieve it. This investment takes the form of preparation and scholarship. Along with this willingness is the expectation that the same individuals who seek more and are willing to invest more are often uniquely equipped by motivation, aptitude, and experience to achieve more. A careful selection process can identify the officers who have the motivation and aptitude to best benefit from the scholars' opportunity. Selection of such scholars is a form of talent management and capitalization on potential (U.S. Department of the Army [DA], 2014b). The goal is to achieve maximum potential over the last half of a professional officer's career.

The focus of the curriculum itself is long-term rather than short-term. It is not designed to equip battalion and brigade operations and executive officers, though it does that. It is designed to develop future strategists and operational artists by ap-

propriating an intense focus on research and applied graduate military history. The seminar debate is designed to identify and develop leadership traits leading to command. The CGSC leadership curriculum is in fact closely integrated with the history curriculum so that scholars discuss key historical leaders in the historical context of their events (U.S. Army CGSC, 2016).

Much of the discussion is about national culture leading to ways of war, the interface of politics and military commitment, and the practice of operational art by leaders over time. This high-level focus matches the type of issues and places of duty over the second half of a graduate's career. This in-depth understanding of the interface of national strategy and operational art is exactly what future joint and combined leaders need. Connecting history to a dialogue about national ways of war as they evolve over time is productive for military officers who can relate well to civilian leaders (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015). Graduation from the Art of War Scholars program accelerates the understanding of strategy needed in the national capital region or at the combatant commands. Completion of the Art of War Scholars program is designed to enhance the capacities that make officers excellent contributors to military think tanks or high-level service and joint staffs later in their careers. It directly fulfills one of the new joint professional military education end states by educating joint officers who

are strategically minded warfighters or applied strategists who can execute and adapt strategy through campaigns and operations. All graduates should possess critical and creative thinking skills, emotional intelligence, and effective written, verbal, and visual communications skills to support the development and implementation of strategies and complex operations. (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020)

Art of War scholars focus on the development of strategic thinking, critical thinking, and clear communication skills. These same skills enable the graduate's professional development over the second half of their careers and are in keeping with what is needed for joint operations in the current environment.

Given these high goals over the long term, many of the enduring effects of this program honestly remain to be determined.

The performance of Art of War scholars is high in seminar performance, thesis quality, and postgraduation assignments through the first decade of the program. Art of War scholars are regularly recognized for their achievements at CGSC graduation, with several winning such graduation recognition as the top U.S. or international graduate, the best thesis or military history thesis, and other writing achievement awards in the areas of leadership, interagency, or communications. Art of War scholars compete at a high rate for recognition as either master strategists or master tacticians. The best of their Master of Military Art and Science theses are published as Art of War papers. The findings of their research are published in article length by *Proceedings*, *Military Review*, and the Association of the U.S. Army's Institute of

Land Warfare. They are engaged and competent competitors for the highest levels of achievement in their CGSOC classes. Graduates of the first four classes of this curriculum accede to battalion command at rates well above the Army average; they receive assignments to strategic and commanding general's initiatives groups and are selected for funded attendance to the Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy program.

### **Key Elements of Art of War Scholars Program Design as Representative of CGSC Scholars Potential**

#### ***Built Around Thesis Research***

The Art of War Scholars program is built around the fundamental premise that enhanced research benefits the profession of arms. All scholars complete an MMAS thesis. This is a program requirement and now distinguishes the scholar from those officers who complete a Master of Operational Studies. The thesis is the permanent intellectual evidence of the student's intellectual effort remaining after graduation. Based on personal experience in completing letters of recommendation, thesis work is fundamental to the application to terminal degree programs as the officer's career progresses. The thesis reflects the deeper level of inquiry engendered by the program. All scholars have the opportunity to complete primary source research at a variety of archives and libraries. Examples include the National Archives at its various locations, the various presidential libraries, and archival repositories such as the Army Heritage and Education Center and the Combined Arms Research Library Archives. This primary source research experience is a key learning outcome itself. The ability to conduct original and effective research and writing is also fundamental to staff effectiveness as the officer progresses to future assignments. Based on my seven years' experience on high-level staffs and in leading two strategic initiatives groups, the crafting of a coherent argument from research from sources is a critical-thinking skill required of our very best officers.

#### ***Focused on Deep Reading***

The syllabus for the Art of War Scholars course shows that the Art of War scholars accomplish an extensive program of graduate-level reading to prepare for their seminars, comparable to that for the Advanced Military Studies program or graduate programs at America's elite universities. This is the educational benefit and professional development benefit of reading widely and deeply and to compare alternative views of the same argument. It is the advanced ability to master and harness vast

quantities of reading. The Art of War scholars cover the expanse of modern military history from the Russo-Japanese War to Afghanistan and Iraq episode by episode in rich historical context. Both the volume of reading and the complexity of reconciling opposing points of view develop in the scholar higher order academic skills. Reading for understanding is a practiced graduate school skill.

### ***Writing for Effect***

The master's theses written by Art of War scholars over 10 cohorts, including multiple CGSC writing award winners, show that they master the art of academic prose and the powers of persuasive academic writing. Their master's theses, under direction of their original MMAS thesis committee chairs, argue persuasively on a variety of topics related to the art of war. The Scholars seminar encourages peer review and collaboration on improving the quality and logic of argument. Scholars challenge and encourage each other to higher quality writing. The process of working with a thesis committee and a peer review group enhances the scholars' writing and thinking skills and improves the quality of the finished product.

### ***Contributing to the Body of Knowledge***

The Combined Arms Research Library Digital Collection online shows that Art of War scholars' MMAS theses, like all other theses written at the CGSC, are filed in the Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library and available through the Defense Technical Information Center to other national security researchers and academic research institutions. Selected theses are published as Art of War papers. Beyond this, many Art of War Scholar theses are extracted or summarized for article-length publication in military professional journals such as *Military Review*, *Interagency Journal*, and Association of the United States Army Land Warfare Papers. Increasingly, this condensation of thesis research into article-length findings appears to be the way that Art of War scholars work will be offered to the force. In these, and through professional blogs, Art of War scholars contribute their findings to the professional body of knowledge.

### ***Seminar Dialogue and Debate***

End-of-course surveys and dialogue in thesis peer review groups show that scholars benefit from the perceptions and honest disagreements of their peers in an environment that encourages respectful debate from the standpoint of individual



insight. Iron sharpens iron. Scholars benefit from the synthesis of prepared material offered in seminar discussion through shared insights from their peers. They spur each other on to higher levels of inquiry and intellectual achievement. The organizing principle in making selection of Art of War scholars is that they will reinforce and challenge each other's learning to the highest degree possible in an adult learning environment. Scholars recognize each other's strengths and learn to appreciate alternative, even conflicting, points of view in an environment grounded in mutual encouragement and mutual respect.

### ***The Benefit of Subject-Matter Experts***

The Art of War Scholars course schedule shows that whatever the seminar topic of the day, the Art of War scholars normally have a subject-matter expert present to introduce the subject and set the tone of the day's discussion. This allows for a variety of presentation styles, pedagogical approaches, and academic philosophies to inform the discussion and challenge the scholars to engage and react. These subject-matter experts include several respected civilian professors who develop deeper knowledge on the part of the scholars. Not only are scholars exposed to subject expertise, but they are also exposed to published authors with recognized work. This encourages the process of research and writing through the provision of scholarly role models. The Art of War scholars are also acquainted in this manner with practitioners of the art of war, who are mentors with long experience in the profession. These practitioners are normally previous general officers who have clearly mastered the concepts under discussion or who have lived firsthand through the historical episode under study.

### ***Developing Joint and Combined Thinkers***

The rosters of scholars over 10 cohorts show that one of the hallmarks of the Scholars seminar composition is the reliable representation of the variety of U.S. military services and selected scholars from the international military student cohort. The norm is an officer from each of the services with an international student officer. This allows for representative dialogue from each service perspective, often reflecting each service culture, and a viewpoint from a key ally in the world. This usually broadens the perspective of the Army scholars as they reflectively consider alternative, even conflicting, strategic and operational viewpoints.

Not only is the seminar composition joint and combined, but the subject matter in the curriculum is also. Graduate military history seminars are not confined to landpower or the United States. Instead, Art of War scholars discover several other national ways of war and the application of sea and airpower over the course of the


20th century. When integrated with the theory of war from the broadest perspective, this course truly begins to build the foundation for joint and combined thought.

## ***Developing Strategic Leaders***

The mix of modern military history consumed by the Art of War Scholars contains strong doses of operational art and national military strategy. In reconciling competing points of view regarding successes and failures of national strategy over the course of the most recent century, for a variety of national experiences, not just the United States, the Art of War scholar develops an advanced perception of the practice of national strategy. This anticipates the amount of strategic thinking required to excel in positions of increasing responsibility over the second half of an officer's career.

The combination of these educational factors means that the Art of War scholars have unique intermediate level education experiences that both challenge and reward them. They bear a heavy burden academically but reach a depth of learning that endures and leads them to a higher plateau of understanding for the rest of their careers. An emerging trend, judged by their record of assignments and promotion, is that their investment pays off with professional dividends. It directly fulfills the goal of developing strategic thinkers, which is part of the major theme of optimizing human performance in the current *U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education* (U.S. DA, 2017).

## **Implications for the Future**

The Art of War Scholars program, as illustrative of the possibilities representative of the CGSC Scholars program, meets a continuing need for some officers to reach a higher level of contribution and learning than the majority of their peers in the CGSOC. The officers themselves determine this need. Thankfully, the framework for CGSC Scholars allows continued evolution to meet operational and environmental requirements at the same time as it offers an enhanced learning opportunity for those who desire it. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that there is a need across the force to develop officers who are strategic thinkers (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). The Art of War Scholars program is a subset of CGSC Scholars programs, but its curriculum, process, and outcomes develop officers who meet this requirement for strategic thinkers. The program's strong professional development meets the need for officers who are also versed in operational art. The program develops officers who have the individual capacity to communicate, research, and write about the most complex issues confronting our senior leaders in national defense today. It amply fulfills this higher purpose and is a proven vehicle for developing the best leaders for the Department of Defense and internationally into the future. 

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