

Answering the Hottest Question in Army Education

What Is Army University?

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Abstract

The most common question heard by senior members of Army University is always, “What is Army University?” The newest education institution in the U.S. Army was created to unify the training and educational institutions of the Army, making the large learning organization more effective and efficient for its soldiers, bringing together thirty-seven different institutions in twenty-three states, with an annual student throughput of five hundred thousand. Encompassing two different degree-producing schools, the University seeks to improve opportunities for soldiers in credentialing and licensure, along with exploring the ability to grant a limited number of military-focused undergraduate degrees. Just as critical, the University has the responsibility to grow relationships with civilian learning partners in the educational and corporate communities to aid active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve soldiers while in service and in thousands of cities and towns throughout the United States.

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On 9 April 2011, Mark Milliron stepped to the podium as a plenary speaker at the annual meeting of the Higher Learning Commission in Chicago. He was there representing the Gates Foundation, and as part of his presentation, he introduced the phrase “end-to-end learning pathway.” Milliron was talking about a continuum in American education that would join secondary schools, community colleges, and our university system into a single pathway to best serve American

students and American society. While this type of pathway proved to be nearly impossible across countless local school districts, fifty different state bodies, and a multitude of colleges and universities, it was an idea that resonated with the U.S. Army. While the civilian version of such a multischool, multistate pathway proved elusive, with active Army, Army Reserve, and National Guard soldiers geographically spread across the Nation and overseas, the idea of a holistic learning pathway continuum as the central foundation of the Army learning community is not only intriguing, it is essential. Properly organized, the Army can enable and manage the common learning pathway for all service members, whether they are enlisted or commissioned officers, and whether they will serve for three years or for thirty.

A pathway similar to Milliron's idea found its way into the Army learning lexicon as the Career-Long Learning Continuum originally laid out in the *U.S. Army Learning Concept* in 2011.¹ Recognizing that each soldier took a learning pathway tied largely to his or her rank and specialty, the Army saw the possibility of creating a process by which the training and education required could be built in a sequential and progressive fashion. This process would combine the best of technical and military specialty education with the necessary critical and creative thinking skills that are so important in any endeavor. Though our enlisted soldiers generally enter service without an undergraduate degree, our officers almost universally hold at least an undergraduate degree, and our civilian employees enter at many different points with many different levels of educational achievement. The Army has the ability to build processes that meet the needs of everyone and contribute to everyone's intellectual achievement.

A major challenge inside the Army to such a learning continuum framework is the relationship between training and education. By far, the largest portion of the early part of an Army career is consumed with specific training for specific skills. At the training end of the continuum, the Army has to prepare truck drivers to drive trucks and combat medics to take care of wounded soldiers. It must train infantry and artillery soldiers to execute their combat tasks and work cohesively as a team. It must give young officers the troop-leading skills necessary to effectively lead their units. At the educational end of the continuum, the Army must improve intellectual habits of mind—commonly identified as the abilities to think critically and creatively—within an ethical framework, to help prepare Army leaders for the uncertainty and complexity of future missions around the world.

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The first part of this learning continuum is similar to the training requirements of the skilled trades outside the military world. Army truck drivers receive training and education similar to that received at a community college truck-driving academy, with the major difference likely being that the Army and the soldier invest more time than the civilian student due to the need to prepare Army drivers for much more diverse terrain and road conditions. In the same way, Army welders are well trained in their skill set, much as the student at an equivalent civilian trade school.

A major identified difference is that while the civilians can work toward a specific career certification, the Army student often cannot. While Army training matches some of the best civilian training in the world, it often does not result in the same trade-based certifications as its civilian counterparts. Similarly, many of the Army's enlisted soldiers strive to improve themselves educationally, only to be frustrated by their inability to coalesce their coursework into an identifiable degree from an accredited college or university.

A web of diverse state regulations and certifying bodies frustrates the training portion of the continuum, while continuing problems caused by repeated deployments, short-term assignments, and transferability of academic credit from one institution to another frustrate and often inhibit educational outcomes and successful completion.

What Is Army University?

In 2015, the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, examined the landscape of training and professional military education in the Army and perceived an opportunity. The training and education portions of the enterprise were related but functioned separately, and while effective in their individual functions, they were not as efficient as they could have been. Learning institutions at all levels were performing their tasks well, but the structure to make the Career-Long Learning Continuum a reality simply did not exist. Striving to be effective, the two critical portions of the enterprise missed out on opportunities to improve efficiency and to collaborate with civilian institutions in a way that would meet the challenges its soldiers were facing. The Army had a history of excellence, but it needed to figure out how to leverage the best of the Army training and educational efforts with the dynamic opportunities in the U.S. public and private higher education arena. The solution identified was to create a single entity within the Combined Arms Center, responsible for governing both the training and education activities.

Army University, also located at Fort Leavenworth, was chartered by then Secretary of the Army John M. McHugh and then Chief of Staff of the Army General Ray Odierno on 7 July 2015. Its stated mission is to educate and develop Army professional leaders who are ready to fight and win in today's complex world, are



prepared to shape solutions for tomorrow's battlefield, and are armed to succeed for life.² Encompassing an expansive training base, with thirty-seven separate learning institutions across twenty-three states, the University is responsible for training and educating more than five hundred thousand students in any given year. The extent of the physical range of the University is borne out in the fact that it manages learning activities in the footprint of all of the regional accrediting bodies in the United States.

Most consist of institutions that house both training and education activities but are not degree producing—more in line with what civilian institutions would consider to be continuing education. While the majority of its students are involved in continuing education activities, the University does house two regionally accredited entities, the graduate degree-producing Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and the associate degree-producing Defense Language Institute (DLI). The CGSC, which is located at Fort Leavenworth, is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, while DLI, located in Monterey, California, is accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

What Is Army University Intended to Do?

The Army's training and education system exists to create professionals who have the ability to operate in complex environments that feature a wide range of allies and adversaries and are able to prevent, shape, or (when necessary) fight and win the Nation's wars. The extended conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq brought clarity to the need for soldiers and an Army civilian workforce to be intellectually agile and able to adapt to ever-changing conditions.

While the Cold War had allowed the Army to focus on a single enemy in a single region, today's Army must be prepared to excel in any corner of the world against an ever-increasing variety of foes. Senior Army leaders identified the need for intellectual improvement to meet this mission and provided a road map with the publication of the *U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*. In many ways, Army University is the next step toward achieving the goals of the *Army Learning Concept*. The concept stresses the habits of mind mentioned earlier, seeking to create an Army learning system that would improve and optimize intellectual performance. While the Army must continue to have the best technical and combat training in the world, it also needs to continue to improve its soldiers' abilities in respect to these habits of mind. Included in this focus on creating intellectually more agile, adaptive, and innovative service members was the ongoing responsibility to create soldiers who are lifelong learners, always continuing to improve themselves in their profession. Thus, Army University, in effect, is charged with leading a culture shift in the way the Army approaches learning from an institutional, school-house-based approach to a continuum of training and education experiences spanning classrooms, the workplace, and self-directed learning.



Analyzing the need to improve these intellectual habits of mind while continuing to maintain a world-class training base brought the university to focus on multiple avenues to meet the challenge. Most educators agree that the most important factor to improve student learning is increasing the quality of instructors facilitating the learning environment, followed closely by improving the quality and rigor of the curricula. Army University set out to build on the Army's already extensive faculty and curriculum development efforts in order to create and support a world-class faculty dedicated to military learning.

The creation of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) at Fort Leavenworth served to integrate and synchronize faculty and curriculum development in a single enterprise institution to aid the various schools and colleges in these two areas. CTLE does not house all of the Army's faculty and curriculum developers but serves as the hub that facilitates the program within these communities of practice. Working with faculty and curriculum developers across the learning enterprise, CTLE develops programs that support all of the University's various schools and colleges.

While the Army considers faculty and curriculum development the most critical aspect of a learning environment, the physical and digital components of such an environment must also be addressed. The Army has, for the past decade, invested in learning facilities and data pipelines that would be the envy of all but the wealthiest educational institutions. With this excellent foundation, Army University continues to focus on how we can further improve and innovate to meet future learning challenges.

While always mindful of cybersecurity concerns, the University champions the Army's need to make their learning platforms more easily available to their students and viable on the mobile devices that are so much a part of today's students' lives. It is important to remember that the Army's students are reflective of the same generational themes as their counterparts in the civilian world. As such, they are exposed to today's digitally connected world just as everyone else in our society. To meet their needs and to stay at the forefront of educational technology requires that Army University focus significant energies and resources on this issue.

Another key to Army University's success is focused on creating an environment in which Army schools and colleges are brought in line with recognized educational best practices as represented in various accrediting and credentialing bodies. These groups have for years laid out best practices and standards that are the hallmark of high-quality training and education. Within the University, the Army has created an office that is focused on regional and national accrediting and certification standards. This group of professionals will spend the next few years identifying the correct standards to apply to various Army training and educational programs and building relationships to effect change in Army practices. The end result will be improved recognition of soldiers' learning through professional credentialing and furthering opportunities for attainment of academic credit.



All quality educational institutions have a focus on improving the body of knowledge representative of its disciplines. The Army's professional body of knowledge is the domain of Army University and, with the assistance of the Army University Press, the University has the task to improve the quantity and quality of scholarship directed at the profession of arms. In addition to its focus on national security and military scholarship, Army University is well positioned to make significant contributions and help drive and proactively ride at the forefront of the dynamic learning curve of other fields of study, to include leadership and adult education. The Center for Army Leadership, though not a part of the University, has long been a leader in the study of leadership and is closely aligned with the University and various leadership teaching departments throughout the Army to improve the Army's contribution to the discipline.

The field of adult education, the theoretical foundation of the Army's faculty development efforts, is an area in which CTLE has been tasked to add scholarship and expanded educational collaboration. Most of the members of the faculty development portion of CTLE possess adult educational degrees and a section of CTLE is dedicated to contributing to the research in adult education and returning that scholarship to the Army's classrooms.

In order to make these improvements, Army University is tasked with creating new business practices to implement policies and new governance models to improve assessment practices and learning performance. Organized with a policy and guidance responsibility under the vice provost for learning systems and academic responsibilities under the vice provost for academic affairs, the University is structured much like other educational institutions to provide the best possible governance of the very large U.S. Army enterprise learning structure outlined previously.

Focused on improving the educational preparation of soldiers along the Career-Long Learning Continuum and creating an Army of lifelong learners will require Army University to create partnerships with a wide variety of civilian entities. Whether state governments, corporate partners, or educational institutions, the University must pursue relationships that will improve its ability to secure what soldiers require to improve throughout their Army career. Making the most of Army opportunities is critical to the development of soldiers, but the creation of quality partnerships will allow soldiers to develop beyond what is possible with the Army alone.

How Will Army University Interface with Civilian Educational Institutions and Other Partners?

Army University is responsible to Army leadership to identify and create the necessary relationships to move Army learning and soldiers forward in all fields. Credentialing programs represent one of the first focal areas addressed by Army University, which seeks to provide soldiers in each military occupational specialty the opportu-



nity to link their specialty to civilian credentialing such as licenses and certification. Such programs cover a wide variety of specialties, ranging from commercial drivers' licenses for Army vehicle drivers to national certification for Army welders, and involve certification authorities in state governments, continuing education units in various community colleges, and private certification authorities that represent the communities of practice they monitor. These trade certifications represent preparation that will make these soldiers better while in service, but will also follow them into civilian life and prepare them for a productive and prosperous career when they leave service. They also can concurrently benefit both military and civilian careers for those in the U.S. Army National Guard and Reserve.

Much has been made of Army University and whether or not it will become an engine for the creation of degrees to be awarded by the Army. Currently, Army University schools grant both master's and associate's degrees as identified earlier. Plans are being matured to potentially create a path for select soldiers to earn baccalaureate degrees in specifically Army-related fields. What the University does not intend to do is create a full degree program and offer general education courses to compete with civilian institutions.

The Army University program, as currently conceived, might include a degree completion program focused on senior noncommissioned officers and granted through the CGSC. It would require cooperation from colleges and universities throughout the Nation to provide general education opportunities and lower division courses that can be used as the foundation for the degree completion program. Prior learning assessment, through partnerships with organizations such as the American Council on Education and the Council for Adult Experiential Learning, will also be necessary to aid soldiers in pursuing their undergraduate degrees. This program will not take students away from Army partners but increase soldiers' needs for additional credits in their educational programs. The University is studying the best practices in competency-based education across the country in order to identify those well-suited to the Army's needs. The flexibility of competency-based education, whether in direct assessment or hybrid mode, has great potential to serve soldiers' educational and professional needs. Additional graduate programs with civilian partners are always a possibility, as the CGSC has created such programs in partnership with local universities for many years. Currently, degrees in various business disciplines, adult education, security studies, supply chain management, and interagency studies are offered by civilian universities at Fort Leavenworth, in addition to the college's Master of Military Arts and Sciences.

Beyond certifications and degrees, Army University has sought out partnerships with educational institutions and corporate learning organizations that will allow it to identify and incorporate the best new innovations in classroom and workplace learning to move the Army along as a learning organization. Opportunities such as the Learning Innovation Laboratory at the Harvard Graduate School of Education provide the University with a platform to partner with the best America's learning community has



to offer. These public-private partnerships will sustain the Army's learning innovation into the future and allow the Army to intellectually surpass its adversaries for decades to come. The creation of Army University is not, and will never be, a threat to civilian education institutions. On the contrary, it represents the Army's best efforts to improve its learning environment throughout its training and education enterprise by becoming more efficient at our core competencies. It will improve what we do best and create strong partnerships to take advantage of the best of the U.S. higher education system. The combination and diversity of opportunity is powerful and far better than any single centralized solution. As such, Army University creates fertile ground for the learning efforts of everyone associated with soldiers, enabling success for all partners of the Army learning enterprise, while providing the best education experience possible for American soldiers. In the end, the Nation benefits through an improved, more professional, agile, and adaptive Army whose soldiers are best prepared to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. The Nation also benefits by further preparing soldiers for a career in the civilian world, whether now as members of the Army Reserve and Army National Guard, or in the future upon retirement or departure from active service. ❧

Notes

1. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet (TP) 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015* (Fort Monroe, VA: TRADOC, 2011). This pamphlet has been superseded by TP 525-8-2 *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education: 2020-2040* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, April 2017).

2. "Army University Proclamation," Army University website, July 2015, accessed 11 September 2017, <http://armyu.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/ArmyU%20Proclamation.pdf>.

