

What Is Army University Supposed to Do and How Is It Going so Far?

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The U.S. Army has always placed tremendous emphasis on training and education. It is a foundational part of our culture, dating back to Washington and Von Steuben training that transformed the Continental Army at Valley Forge, the founding of West Point in 1802, the establishment of the School for Cavalry and Infantry at Fort Leavenworth in 1881, and most recently, the establishment of Army University on 7 July 2015. Warfare is and will remain the most difficult of human endeavors, and in the multifaceted world of today, developing soldiers and civilians with the technical, professional, and leadership skills to “win in a complex world” is more important than ever. The Army has never stood still when it comes to improving training and education, but recently, Army leadership has recognized that the rate of change in the operating environment necessitates a true transformation in the way we approach learning in the Army to ensure readiness of our forces now and far into the future. We needed a more innovative enterprise-wide approach to create a culture of career-long learning and to dramatically increase the rate of innovation across the Army.

What Will Army University Do?

The launch of Army University defined eight key objectives to address innovation and reinvigorate learning across the Army:

1. Develop a world-class faculty
2. Professionalize curriculum development
3. Grow qualified students
4. Adopt nationally recognized standards
5. Improve professional research and publication
6. Expand public-private partnerships
7. Implement new business and governance practices
8. Create an innovative learning environment¹

These objectives, while not easy to achieve, are easily recognized by other services and the very best U.S. colleges and universities as key objectives of an institute of higher learning. The Army and other services, however, must also address three key attributes that set them apart from a typical model for higher education: (1) we are the “end user” of our students, (2) we must address a full spectrum of learning

for a wide variety of cohorts with varied educational backgrounds (civilian, enlisted, commissioned officer, and warrant officer), and (3) we must provide effective learning throughout a career. Soldiers complete their training and education courses and then fill our operational and institutional units, providing the technical skills, professional expertise, and leadership of Army units whether active duty, Army Reserve, or National Guard. Like our sister military services, with minor exceptions in the medical and legal fields, we do not and cannot hire in at middle management for our uniformed personnel. It is too difficult to develop the experience, leadership, and warfighting skills required at higher echelons, *so our learning has to be effective.*

Our soldiers and civilians are recruited into the Army with a wide variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from those with high school diplomas to those possessing PhDs. The *learning environment must be adaptive* to the needs of the learners, engaging them at their level, and progressing them through challenging and relevant curriculum and instruction to higher levels of learning. Further, our learning enterprise must be capable of expanding the cognitive abilities, technical skills, and leadership abilities of each of our four cohorts over their entire careers. This would be unachievable without a complete, holistic learning pathway continuum. This *long-term focus on learning* also provides a unique opportunity. Unlike a typical university, by design, our students will transition from school to operational or institutional units and back again into our school system several times over a career. So, if designed properly, we can achieve a sequential and progressive career-long learning pathway.

A second critical challenge is the rapid communication and technology development cycles of today, which clearly impact the means in which we conduct current and future warfare. We have to inculcate very rapid feedback mechanisms into our culture and governance processes to acquire operational lessons learned, and we must identify gaps in knowledge from continual review of best practices from military, government, industry, and academia and infuse this new information into our learning outcomes. In the 1960s through the 1990s, the cycle time for introducing changes into Army training and education was typically three to five years. This is not fast enough for today's rapidly changing environment. Soldiers must be able to not only keep pace with quickly shifting requirements but also to thrive in conditions of change in order to dominate adversaries during unified land operations or any other missions assigned to the U.S. military. This requires constant assessment and

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reassessment of the necessary knowledge, skills, and attributes of our four cohorts, accompanied by a governance process capable of quickly adapting to needed change.

Other key challenges include scale and scope. The Army University learning ecosystem is comprised of thirty-seven different institutions that are physically located in twenty-three states. Each of these institutions resides within the footprint of one of the six higher education regional accrediting bodies, and together they have an annual throughput of more than one-half million students.² This learning ecosystem supports soldiers and Department of the Army civilian professionals in all fifty states plus numerous overseas locations. Many of our learning efforts are focused on what has traditionally been categorized as either training or education. Few have been degree producing, and a large percentage are more similar to continuing education, whether for technical or common managerial skills. Furthermore, we must have a professional military education (PME) system that supports career development and lifelong learning while recognizing that a very high percentage of soldiers only serve for a few years. For example, according to the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, less than 15 percent of active-duty enlisted soldiers serve twenty years; roughly 130,000 soldiers transition from Army service each year. Therefore, our learning ecosystem must also support transitioning soldiers and setting them up for success with certificates, licenses, and educational credentials that will enable them to continue to excel after they transition out of the military.

How Is It Going so Far?

With any new organization, the challenge is always, “What is most important? Where should we begin?” Prioritizing a new staff to work through the myriad of challenges to achieve an organization’s goals is difficult. Army University has achieved its initial operating capability and is making good progress towards achieving full operational capacity by late fall 2017. (Initially it was to have been in summer 2017, but a hiring freeze slowed advancement.) That said, we are not waiting. We are aggressively working across the Army, partnering and collaborating with the very best of academia and industry, to improve individual soldier and civilian readiness that directly contributes to improved unit collective readiness through better institutional technical, professional, and functional learning. A discussion of select key focus areas we have been working on this year follows.

Rigor and relevance. Historically, much of Army learning was task-based. We would bring together subject-matter experts to develop task lists and then, based on time and resources available, determine what could and could not be included in either resident or online distance learning. Over the last ten years, we have changed our learning approach, adopting state-of-the-art adult learning sciences for a learner-focused learning environment. This has led to a significant reduction in lecture-type formats and to much more engaging and active dialogue between the instructor and

learner, including additional emphasis on peer-to-peer learning. Improvements in rigor and relevance are also being addressed through the adoption of a competency pyramid that focuses all Army learning within a framework of four Army learning areas and fourteen general learning outcomes for each of the four cohorts across a career of learning.³ The foundation of this pyramid is anchored by individual competencies, from which collective unit competencies, unified land action, and unified action competencies are constructed. The key attribute of this framework is that, for the first time, all Army learning is focused on developing the most relevant enabling learning objectives, terminal learning objectives, and levels of learning on competencies that directly contribute to individual and unit readiness.

Staff and faculty development, and badging/recognition. If you were to ask anyone in academia, “What’s the most effective way to improve student learning?” the most likely answer would be to “start with improving your faculty.” As we adopt a much more learner-centric approach, we recognize the need to further invest in our faculty and staff development. This year, Army University’s Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence set out to do just that. By taking a holistic look at the most innovative ways the Army approaches learning and comparing that to best practices from the learning sciences, we have established the Army’s first ever, single staff and faculty development program. The new program takes the great techniques and procedures from the various programs that existed before and consolidates them for a Total Army solution. The program is in place for all active-duty educators and curriculum developers this year and will be rolled out to all National Guard and Army Reserve school centers next year. In concert with the new program, the Army has expanded its badging and recognition program; soldiers and civilians will soon see an increase in awards and display of instructor badges.

In addition to these classroom improvements, the new program is also working toward accreditation by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Once accredited, military instructors will have the opportunity to be awarded ANSI credentials, which are valuable for academic credit and civilian employment opportunities.

Degree efforts. The Army has typically performed extremely well at educating its officers. Because most officers join the service with at least a bachelor’s degree or higher, the path toward an advanced degree is generally easier to construct. The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the U.S. Army War College, and the Defense Language Institute all are accredited by regional academic accrediting bodies to award college credit and degrees to their students who complete the requisite coursework. Expanding these types of programs to our warrant officer, enlisted, and civilian cohorts is required to meet both the education goals of our military community and the operational needs of the future Army. Army University has identified several avenues to expand degree opportunities.

Continuing education degree programs are established by Army centers of excellence, usually with local colleges and universities, to complement Army learning ob-

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jectives with related civilian education programs. All centers of excellence are working to establish new continuing education programs by the end of this year. A new initiative for NCOs attending the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) will provide students the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree in "leadership and workforce development," taking advantage of the coursework they completed while a USASMA student and building on the general education credits (e.g., college math and English) they earned earlier in their careers as NCOs.

Credentialing. Army University, working closely with the Army G1, Human Resources Command, and Installation Management Command, is establishing a holistic Army credentialing strategy to ensure our soldiers and civilians are receiving the recognized credentials they deserve for completing Army education and training programs or through demonstrated competency. We expect senior Army leadership approval by June 2017 and aggressive implementation in the coming year.

Credentialing is a tough problem, one that has gotten a lot of attention lately from leaders at all levels, including Sergeant Major of the Army Daniel Dailey and members of Congress. A part of the challenge lies in the wide range of credentials available. There are approximately eleven thousand nationwide, but only a small percentage are high-payoff credentials related to military expertise with some link to military occupational specialties and additional skill identifiers, and few are promoted as "in demand" according to the Department of Labor analysis of those most desired in the coming decade in the public and private sector.

The Army credentialing strategy assists soldiers and leaders with identifying and achieving these "right" credentials that increase soldier and unit readiness, professionalize the force, and create career-ready soldiers capable of transitioning Army skills into civilian employment and education opportunities. Soldiers will be able to more easily decipher which credentials lead to promotion points and which are considered "in-demand" by civilian industry, and they will be able to enroll in a program that will support self-directed credentialing opportunities related to their military training and skills.

Guided self-development. Although this project will not begin in earnest until next year, it is worth highlighting where we are heading. Capitalizing on our efforts to expand credentialing and academic partnerships, Army University will pursue collaborative partnerships with a few of the best American universities in each of the regional accrediting bodies' geographical areas to pursue guided self-development opportunities for soldiers and civilians.

Self-development may come in the form of online learning, weekend or evening seminars, or a blend of the two—typically short in duration and focused at junior- and senior-level collegiate academics. Once completed, students will receive a micro-credential or micro-credit that, when combined, or *stacked*, with other related and sequential micro-credits, will equate to a full and fully transferable credential or academic credit. Initial focus areas will include communication, leadership, project

management, counseling/coaching, and training instructor/facilitator—all subjects that will help soldiers be better within and beyond the military.

This is a very exciting opportunity for the Army to be a part of a growing trend in U.S. higher education. Fortune 500 companies, academia, and higher-education industry leaders see exceptional value in this emerging educational concept. Students spend less time away from work and families, and they are better able to select the short-term education or skills-development courses that meet their immediate developmental needs. Additionally, employers get to see documented, recognized competencies from potential new hires.

Competency-based education and the learner profile. Another growing trend across the private sector and academia is competency-based learning. The Army has always been one of the very best organizations in our nation in developing the knowledge, skills, and attributes—the competencies—needed to enable soldiers to serve and excel. Of particular note are the small-unit leadership competencies we build in our junior NCOs and junior officers. However, we did not recognize and capture those competencies in an effective, holistic manner. By not documenting and capturing those competencies effectively and holistically, we lost a huge opportunity for a return on that investment. We executed the training and education, but we did not properly complete the last, very important part: tying those competencies to the recognized lexicon of academia and industry. This missed last step represents a double loss. First, it is a loss for soldiers who do not receive quality recognition for standards they have achieved. Second, it is a loss to taxpayers who often paid for the learning a second time either through soldiers' repeating coursework in later military courses in which they have already demonstrated competency, or through soldiers pursuing documented learning and often paying for it again (typically with taxpayer educational assistance) after they transition out of military service.

Army University has an opportunity to be on the leading edge of competency-based education (CBE) efforts. The scale of our student population, the scope of the training and education enterprise, and the resources committed to Army learning dictate that we continue to commit to ongoing and future outreach opportunities with leading universities and the public and private sectors. Army University must seek the most innovative solutions to meet organizational and individual learning goals. One such partnership is with the Lumina Foundation, a private organization committed to increasing higher education accessibility for all Americans. CBE represents a major shift in the landscape of higher education and is on the leading edge of the industry. CBE measures student learning or mastery of skills instead of credit or clock hours. If students can demonstrate that they have mastered the necessary knowledge, skills, and attributes, they are credentialed at the level of competency that they achieved. Similar to the micro-credits, CBE can be combined to award undergraduate and advanced degrees.

Considering the impact of scale once again, the burden of keeping track of the approximately one-half million students in Army institutional schools, plus another

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one-half million in the operating force (learning through self-development and other means), represents a significant challenge. Enter the *learner profile*. Envisioned as a living document, the learner profile will track and document Army learning and skills mastery throughout a soldier's career. Similar to a university transcript, civilian colleges and universities and civilian employers can use the information to inform academic credit transfers and or employment decisions. Additionally, the data contained in the learner profile could serve as a powerful talent management tool for the Army. Still emergent concepts, CBE and the learner profile represent key initiatives that have the potential for significant payoff in Army readiness.

Army University Press. With the establishment of Army University also came Army University Press. Though much of what we do at Army University Press has been around for many years, the new organization seeks to provide a more contemporary approach to introducing cutting-edge thought and discussion on topics important to the Army and national defense. Through its suite of print and online publication platforms—including this publication, *Military Review*, the *NCO Journal*, and Combat Studies Institute's research and books—Army University Press makes timely and relevant information available to leaders in the military, government, academia, and journalism. The newest developments for Army University Press include a completely redesigned web presence, increased outreach to build upon the military community's body of knowledge and promote professional writing, and a significantly improved social media program. Army University Press, in very short order, has established its presence in both the military community and in the academic world, and it is now a member of the Association of American University Presses, joining over 140 other presses committed to scholarly publishing.

Culture change. With the arrival of Army University, we are *changing our learning culture* and bringing a unifying academic-enterprise approach across the learning domain. We have a long way to go, however. Many of the ideas and efforts outlined above will take a number of years to reach their full potential, not unlike the time it takes to develop the agile and adaptive military leaders we need for the challenges of the twenty-first century security environment. To remain the world's dominant land power and be ready to win in this complex world, the Army must expand its investment in our soldiers and civilians. The establishment of Army University demonstrates that the Army is committed to doing just that. All of our learning efforts, both within our training and education programs and in collaboration with academia, must capitalize on the opportunities we have to (1) increase individual and collective unit readiness, (2) continue to professionalize the Army, and (3) inculcate a culture of lifelong learning to produce soldiers and Army civilians who possess expanded options for career-enhancing opportunities within the Army and ultimately upon transition out of the service.

Finally, some in the Army still question that last part, the investment in transition services. Unfortunately, this is a shortsighted viewpoint. The Army is a profession,

but it is also a big family. We bring in young women and men and ask them to serve a higher purpose—to be part of a meaningful mission—whether they serve for four years or four decades. They join us and become an integral part of our purpose and commitment as a profession. This commitment does not get canceled when someone decides to leave. We ask them to commit to the Army, however long they serve, and we have a mutual obligation and commitment back to support them as a “soldier for life.” As Army leaders, the burden is on us—not in the sense of a true burden, but as an opportunity to set up serving soldiers and Army civilians for success, to connect them with the next part of their life.

Interestingly, when you query veterans who struggle after transition from any of the services, they often highlight a key cause as a loss of a sense of purpose and pride from no longer serving. The efforts of Army University outlined in this paper will further advance the recognition of soldier accomplishments, and when combined with the “soldier for life” efforts, can lead to significant improvements in opportunities for transitioning soldiers and their families. Soldiers will be able to transition, proud of their service and on a path for a new sense of purpose—with their knowledge, skills, and attributes accurately documented through widely recognized credentials that provide opportunity for a different, but renewed and valuable sense of purpose as part of a highly skilled American workforce. 

Notes

1. Execute Order 214-15, “Establishment of the Army University,” Headquarters, Department of the Army, 8 June 2015.

2. The six regional accrediting bodies are the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the Higher Learning Commission, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

3. “Educating Leaders to Win in a Complex World,” General Learning Outcomes White Paper (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University, 25 March 2016).