



# Delivering the Command and General Staff Officer Course at the Operational Edge

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**I**N 2011, THE U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command released its vision for professional military education in *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*. This publication challenges the Army to deliver knowledge to leaders at the “operational edge” to develop adaptive soldiers with cognitive, interpersonal, and cultural skills and sound judgment in complex environments, and to develop an adaptive knowledge delivery system that is responsive, allows rapid updates in curriculum, and is not bound by brick and mortar.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1881, the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth has developed adaptable leaders using multiple resident and nonresident methods. In 1923, the staff college added correspondence courses to educate the officer corps dispersed abroad. In his remarks to the 1937 graduating Command and General Staff College class, Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring remarked:

*Leavenworth may be said to be the metronome of the service. It establishes the training tempo of the Army. Its students are by no means confined to those within the limits of this old post. Through correspondence courses and through its splendid publications, Leavenworth has attracted as students hundreds of officers who have never seen this post. Each year scores of new alumni from Leavenworth carry modern military doctrine to Army posts throughout the country and in our island possessions.*<sup>2</sup>

Seventy-five years later, the Command and General Staff College, through the Command and General Staff School, continues to promulgate modern military doctrine and educate thousands of field grade officers annually both in residence and around the globe. The staff school accomplishes this through an integrated approach of resident and nonresident venues, state of the art technology, distributed learning, and one standard curriculum for the Command and General Staff Officer Course. This approach also fulfills requirements for Army Directive 2012-21 (Optimization of Intermediate-Level Education) to—

- Provide a tailored, high-quality education opportunity for all officers.
- Intermediate Level Education.
- Reinforce education earlier in an officer’s development timeline.<sup>3</sup>

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PHOTO: Graduates of Command and General Staff College Class 12-01 take their seats for the graduation ceremony, 8 June 2012, Fort Leavenworth, Kan. (U.S. Army)

Distributed learning is the delivery of training “to soldiers and [Department of Army] civilians, units, and organizations at the right place and time through the use of multiple means and technology; may involve student-instructor interaction in real time (synchronous) and non-real time (asynchronous).”<sup>4</sup>

The Command and General Staff Officer School consists of a common core course and functional area qualification course. For operations-career field officers, the qualification course is the Advanced Operations Course (AOC). Successful completion of the common course and the respective qualification course is required for award of the Joint Professional Military Education Phase I credit and Military Education Level Four.<sup>5</sup>

The common core prepares all field grade officers with a warfighting focus for leadership positions in Army, joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational organizations executing unified land operations. The AOC provides operations career-field officers with a warfighting focus for battalion and brigade command and prepares them to conduct unified land operations in joint, interagency, and multi-national environments. The course also provides officers with the requisite competencies to serve successfully as division through echelon-above-corps level staff officers.<sup>6</sup>

From an educational standpoint, the common core builds an officer’s foundational knowledge and comprehension of Army and joint doctrine, while AOC uses more of a collaborative learning environment to analyze military problems and apply military processes. Using a sports analogy, the common core is the individual training a player does in the offseason to prepare for the collective team scrimmages of AOC in the preseason. Together, they prepare officers for the complex problems the Army faces in seasons of peace and war.

### **Beyond the “Brick and Mortar” of Fort Leavenworth**

The Army has never been able to bring all officers from all components to the resident course at Fort Leavenworth, regardless of the impacts of selection boards and military conflicts. To create more resident experiences for the common core, the Command and General Staff School established pilot programs at Fort Gordon, Ga., and Fort Lee, Va., in 2003, and another at Fort Belvoir, Va., in 2004. In 2009, the

Army added a fourth common core campus at Redstone Arsenal, Ala. Since the program’s inception, over 6,900 officers have attended an in-class, collaborative common core course.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, since 2004, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation at Fort Benning, Ga., also taught the Command and General Staff Officer Course to U.S. and international field grade officers from 15 different countries.<sup>8</sup>

For decades, The Army School System provided variations of the resident staff officer course to tens of thousands of National Guard and Reserve officers across the country at its 100-plus locations across the continental United States and in Hawaii, Germany, and Puerto Rico. Today, The Army School System continues to teach the common core in three phases to thousands of officers each year using a combination of online lessons, weekend classes, and annual training.

The classic form of nonresident correspondence courses that many call the “box of books” began in 1923 when the college established the Correspondence School for the National Guard and Army Reserve officers. In 1948, correspondence courses were officially renamed Army Extension Courses, and the Command and General Staff College established the Extension Course Department.<sup>9</sup> Over the decades, the department name for nonresident studies changed several more times. In 1997, the Department of Defense and White House established the Advanced Distributed Learning program, an initiative to promote the use of technology-based learning.<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Command and General Staff College began to digitize its curriculum under the School of Advanced Distributed Learning. In 2007, the college completely reorganized, integrating the School of Advanced Distributed Learning and renaming it the Department of Distance Education.<sup>11</sup>

Now the department has three divisions of 80 instructors and advisors who facilitate instruction to over 4,500 Army officers from all three components worldwide. The current faculty is a mix of active duty and retired officers serving as Department of the Army civilians. The Department of Distance Education continues to add faculty to meet the growing student population generated by the 2012 Army Directive for Optimization of Intermediate-Level Education.

Regardless of venue—resident, satellite or distributed learning—all officers receive the same curriculum. Contractors convert the resident materials into computer-based instruction modules for access in the Blackboard learning management system. Such global access is extremely important to officers who already have a full-time military and/or civilian job and must complete the common core and AOC at night, on the weekends, or during deployments. The distributed learning venue also makes the Army’s common core portion of the Command and General Staff Officer Course available to all interested sister service officers and makes AOC available for the Army’s majors working in interagency fellowships.

## **Learning at the Operational Edge**

The Department of Distance Education’s common core course—like the resident common core—has nine blocks of instruction broken into three phases. Students have a maximum of 18 months to complete the course at their pace, though many complete it in less than a year. Having all the course materials accessible online allows flexibility for students deploying in and out of theater, moving to new assignments, and receiving long-term medical treatment. In addition to reviewing approximately 100 lessons with 60-plus quizzes, students submit 21 written individual assignments with which faculty members evaluate students and provide helpful feedback. The asynchronous, self-paced approach in the common core conforms to the Command and General Staff School’s philosophy toward developing agile and adaptive leaders who “must be self-motivated for active participation in our diverse, broad, and ever-changing professional body of knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

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Some officers are concerned that current distributed learning courses are merely digitized versions of the old “box of books” program where students muddled through completely on their own. In a recent article published in *Military Review*, the authors stated that—

The broader [Intermediate-Level Education] program does have a requirement for posting public engagements through means such as blogging or commenting on public forums, but the emphasis is on one-way communication rather than conversation.<sup>13</sup>

Fortunately, both assertions are no longer true. Over the past six years, the Department of Distance Education made great strides in its common core and AOC programs to make them more social.

In 2011, the Research and Development Corporation (RAND) conducted an independent study of the Department of Distance Education’s Common Core. The study noted that while students achieve all of the course’s learning objectives using the online curriculum in Blackboard, they greatly desired interaction with faculty and peers, as well as more timely feedback.<sup>14</sup> Based on these findings, the Command and General Staff School—

- Hired 20 common core course facilitators to provide more interactive assistance and expedited feedback.
- Assigned a facilitator to every student to answer their course questions by email, phone calls, and through Defense Connect Online.
- Offered virtual classrooms using Defense Connect Online technology to provide instructor-to-student and student-to-student assistance in the nine common core blocks of instruction.
- Partnered common core facilitators with resident Command and General Staff Officers Course teaching teams to keep the Department of Distance Education faculty in tune with resident delivery of the curriculum.

The Department of Distance Education also encourages officers to engage their peers and supervisors in professional forums like the “S-3 XO Net” found at <https://www.milsuite.mil>. At the field grade officer level, making your professional military education a social educational experience is a two-way street.

Upon completing the common core in any venue other than at Fort Leavenworth or the Western



### Professional Military Education to the World

Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation History, officers coordinate with their branch managers to reserve their virtual “seat” in an upcoming AOC distributed learning class. As of 2013, there are four AOC starts per year based on the graduation dates of the four common core satellite locations.

The Department of Distance Education’s AOC program is a 12-month program conducted using both synchronous and asynchronous techniques to achieve an “adaptive learning” environment that transforms “the learner from a passive [recipient] of information to a collaborator in the educational process.”<sup>15</sup> Officers are formed into staff groups of 16 students coming from widely diverse branches, components, and duty stations. It is not unusual to be on a team of officers dispersed from Afghanistan, Kuwait, Germany, Kosovo, the continental United States, Hawaii, and Korea. An AOC facilitator guides two separate staff groups through a yearlong schedule of weekly lessons that currently cover seven blocks of instruction—one leadership block, two military history blocks, and four operations blocks covering Coalition Forces Land Component Command to brigade-level planning.

In AOC, the vast majority of learning takes place through peer-to-peer interaction instead of facilitator-to-student as officers collectively apply Joint and

Army planning processes to analyze and solve complicated problems. As they work, students share their branch expertise, operational experiences, and personal perspectives of the course materials. By the end of Advanced Operations Course, the average staff group will spend approximately 65 hours together online using Defense Connect Online.

In 2012, the RAND Corporation examined the Department of Distance Education’s AOC program using exit and post graduation surveys. Their study found that AOC—

uses a more ambitious approach than most standard distance or blended learning programs in the Army or elsewhere in that it requires substantial instructor-student and student-student interaction and is completely distributed and often synchronous in nature.<sup>16</sup>

This approach has its strengths and weaknesses. As to strengths, the majority of students reported that AOC met its core purpose, student-instructor and student-student interactions were important, and instructors and computer-based instruction lessons were effective. The Command and General Staff School’s continuous improvement process for AOC allows for constant revision and updates. Additionally, the experience gained from AOC’s virtual planning sessions

helps students become agile with collaborative tools in the current and future operational environments.<sup>17</sup>

As to weaknesses, students reported feeling unprepared for interagency and multinational settings, they did not find similar growth compared to resident students in developing critical field grade skills, and they had more issues with effective collaboration in planning and executing the Military Decision Making Process.<sup>18</sup> The Research and Development Corporation also found that while both virtual teams and collocated teams can achieve the same learning objectives, “virtual groups experience more hurdles to collaboration on complex tasks.”<sup>19</sup> One of RAND’s concluding recommendations is to reduce some of the social aspects of the course that make it so challenging for the student. For example, RAND recommends that AOC have fewer synchronous exercises, but make them greater in-depth, while shifting some collaborative activities to higher-level computer based instructions.<sup>20</sup>

There is one social aspect of AOC by distributed learning that should never be removed—the bonding, through shared experiences, of a staff group made up of diverse branches and geographically dispersed officers. Students often discover they work with or live near each other, and in many cases seek out local classmates to collaborate on assignments. Some teams connect using social networking sites such as Facebook, and at least one group continues to share a weekly newsletter. Many AOC facilitators also transition to career-long mentors of former students as they progress in their careers.

## Conclusion

Many years before Army Learning Concept 2015 was published, the Command and General Staff College and School began pushing its renowned resident program to over 100 resident sites with the help of other Army installations and The Army School System, as well as through an ever-evolving correspondence program. Today, Command and General Staff School maintains the Command and General Staff Officer Course curriculum for all venues across the Army, making it globally accessible through the Blackboard learning management system. The school established and professionally staffed the Department of Distance Education to manage the distance-learning instruction of the core course and AOC through a virtual classroom of excellence. The Department of Distance Education continues to improve its instructional approaches and exploit the latest technologies, such as smart phones and tablets and the dot-com domain, to make professional military education as accessible and up-to-date as possible for all mid-grade officers.

No school or program can rest on its accomplishments, especially when professional military education is critical to developing leaders who run the Army and lead our soldiers in unified land operations. The Command and General Staff College and School will continue to learn, adapt, and improve to educate officers serving at the operational edge.

*Ad bellum pace parati* (prepared in peace for war).<sup>21</sup> **MR**

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## NOTES

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