



More than forty graduates make their way to the stage to receive degrees ranging from associate to doctoral during the Fort Rucker Army Education Center graduation ceremony 13 May 2016 at the post theater, Fort Rucker, Alabama. (Photo by Nathan Pfau, *Army Flier*)

# The Importance of a Long-Term Self-Development Concept to Army Officers



Col. Dean A. Nowowiejski, PhD, U.S. Army, Retired

**M**any active-duty Army officers struggle to achieve self-development goals related to their profession. Many also retire without a clear plan for transition into their second career, or without

having achieved their most ambitious academic goals. They struggle over the course of their careers to complete advanced degrees, make coherent sense of their professional development opportunities, or achieve their full

intellectual potential. The course of their careers is instead littered with discrete opportunities: a sequence of professional military education (PME) courses at intervals of years, certificates of completion for military training, some books read, and a master's degree attained during PME, while always having answered the call of successive assignments with their demanding time requirements. Officers generally arrive at the end of their careers in better academic condition, but many fall short of what they would have liked. They are highly educated, but not with the credentials they had aspired to acquire, perhaps not with that prestigious master's degree or that elusive doctorate.

The Army leader development model is clear. It has three domains: institutional training, operational assignments, and self-development.<sup>1</sup> The first two domains are sound and interrelated. Institutional training and operational assignments both come under the close management of Human Resources Command. I will describe the Officer Education System, which provides institutional training, later in this discussion. Operational assignments come regularly for active-duty Army officers from their assignment officer at Human Resources Command and by design fulfill the goals of that leader development domain.

Department of Army (DA) Pamphlet 600-3, *Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, describes that entire process of making operational assignments.<sup>2</sup> It is an enigma that consumes the emotions and time of Army officers and their families throughout their careers. For those who remain engaged, the professional development objectives outlined for each branch and specialty are often met. Assignments come, and the body of operational experience grows. Some might argue that the progression of assignments for some officers does not fully equip them for the high-level goals of the Officer Education System, but that is not a debate for this analysis. Instead, I will focus on that elusive professional development pillar—self-development—because it is simply underappreciated.

The most cynical readers likely will say this domain of leader development is almost nonexistent for most officers, but my observation is that the majority make a reasonable attempt to stay current in their branch or specialty and with global events, within the limits of time demands from work and home. But, do they achieve the objectives of self-development as outlined in the Army's policy and doctrinal authorities?

Self-development surely cannot be happenstance, without intentionality, plan, or long-term objectives; there must be a clear vision and purpose. Self-development requires a conscious personal strategy, clearly defined goals, and from those, a long-term self-development plan. Just like officers plot their assignments, promotion points, children's graduation dates, and key life milestones onto a time line, they should conceive of what self-development they will accomplish over the course of their careers.

In this article, I will establish some simple concepts to help active-duty Army officers conceive their self-development goals and conceptualize how they will reach those goals. First, I will describe the current facts regarding academic education and self-development. Then, I will argue for a broader concept of self-development. Self-development can help to capitalize in new ways on opportunities now missed over the course of a career. This argument will highlight integrated Army educational and broadening opportunities. I will conclude with some specific considerations to enhance lifelong learning.

## The Need for Improved Continuity in Officer Educational Focus

Before I turn to the potential of self-development, let us look at the current state of officer education. This long-standing system has basic and advanced leader courses, intermediate level education (ILE), and senior service college. In many respects, this process is progressive but discontinuous in time and substance. Advanced education is focused on tactical-level, branch, and internal-to-brigade

Col. Dean A.

Nowowiejski, PhD,  
U.S. Army, retired,

served thirty-one continuous years as an active-duty Army officer. He commanded at all levels through brigade and served as a planner from division to joint and combined theater levels. He led strategic initiative groups for an Army service component command and an Army direct reporting unit. He graduated from the School of Advanced Military Studies and was the Army Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Nowowiejski completed his PhD from Princeton University before retiring. He now directs the Art of War Scholars program at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.



considerations. ILE completes tactical education, and it begins the process of operational and strategic education. Senior service college educates in strategy. Though officers spend many years in school, the focus changes as their careers need change.

There are fairly long gaps of years between an advanced course and ILE, and between ILE and senior service college. These gaps must be filled by self-development to form anything resembling a continuous process of learning over the career of an officer.

In truth, the episodic nature of PME means that individual focus on education is also intermittent. Most officers make a valiant attempt at self-development, but they face difficulties in overcoming the obstacles of time demands and higher priorities in duty assignments. Intellectual skills, particularly deep reading and scholarly writing, often atrophy between PME experiences. What should be a progressively and continuously developed ability to write and communicate persuasively often waits for the next PME chance.

Communication skills are at a premium for senior U.S. joint leaders. They must demonstrate high-level personal diplomacy and the ability to solve complex, even intractable, problems. They require personal staff members who can similarly think, write, and communicate. Their staffs must be led by officers who can provide the conceptual support required by Army leader development, built on “sufficiently broad education and experience to operate across the spectrum of conflict.”<sup>3</sup> Army officers must strive to develop and refine writing skills as they move

forward through their careers. The intervals of time between formal military education opportunities make this hard to do.



Maj. Mike Nicholson, U.S. Army, works on an online master of communication degree course offered by the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, while serving in Afghanistan. On 17 May 2013, Nicholson and forty-six other students became the first graduates of the USC Annenberg online program. (Photo courtesy of USC Annenberg)

## The Concept of Self-Development

This policy statement from DA Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, makes clear the demanding standards expected of officer self-development:

The profession of arms requires comprehensive self-study and training. Leaders must commit to a lifetime of professional and personal growth to stay at the cutting edge of their profession. ... Self-development is the key aspect of individual officer qualification that solidifies the Army leader development process.<sup>4</sup>

The self-development domain is critical to the entire leader-development process. It requires that

active-duty officers think carefully about their approach. The main points of this article are derived from close analysis of several pertinent Human Resources Command policy documents on the subjects of officer professional development and education and slating for command.<sup>5</sup> Those points also depend on the guidance given to recent selection boards for the ranks of major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel, the ranks for which active officers qualify as they move toward retirement. All of these documents work within the officer education and professional development systems now dependent on the key component of self-development.

Self-development, as conceptually defined by this policy guidance, depends on a “*lifetime of professional and personal growth* [emphasis added] to stay at the cutting edge of their profession.”<sup>6</sup> Self-development depends on lifelong learning. The demands of high-level thinking and writing are too high to be achieved only in short episodes of institutional education. Lifelong learning is instead a marathon component of each officer’s professional development, critical to the entire process, but most effective when consistently practiced throughout an officer’s career to hone writing, reading, and thinking skills.

The introductory discussion established the long gaps in formal officer education, which are normally filled with operational assignments granting critical experience to the officer. Sometimes, maybe once or twice in a career, an officer is afforded the opportunity for a broadening assignment. Broadening assignments are incorporated into the formal Officer Personnel Management System; they are defined as “purposeful expansion of a leader’s capabilities and understanding provided through opportunities internal and external to the Army.”<sup>7</sup>

Having received new emphasis during the tenure of former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno, Army policy states that broadening assignments have the deep purpose of developing “a continuum of leadership capability ... which bridges diverse environments and organizational cultures.”<sup>8</sup> Odierno saw the need for Army officers who were more accomplished and comfortable operating in complex and sometimes uncertain joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environments. Operational environments worldwide have grown so interconnected and so complex as to require a higher-order, whole-of-government approach that demands Army officers who are educated to operate outside the Army itself.<sup>9</sup>

Broadening thus supports an expanded concept of what is required for officers to learn. It offers critical information but is a unique and infrequent opportunity. Lifelong learning as the method of self-development is still required over the continuum of an officer’s career. Self-development fits into the gaps and smooths the edges between PME and broadening assignments.

What type of self-development meets the lifelong needs of our best officers? Their needs demand a solution that operates over time and provides continuous development. Their needs demand constant intellectual growth. They include broad reading and the ability to accomplish original research. They also include a continuous refinement of writing ability, publication in professional journals, and potentially, a thesis, dissertation, or book. Published work is the key to the reputation of soldier scholars and the quality of professional dialogue. The demands of lifelong learning include these higher-order goals and objectives. Yet, most officers never achieve the plateau of publication or an advanced degree. How can they change this pattern?

For both scientists and social scientists, the ability to conduct research is a required intellectual skill. This ability is first developed as an undergraduate. Some officers barely return to it during a master’s degree program, particularly those which do not require a research project or thesis. But, original research is at the heart of the best advanced-degree programs. The ability to construct an original research plan, to establish either an experimental or a research hypothesis, and then to follow it to valid conclusions distinguishes senior academics. Publication of the findings further marks those in the world of academe.

Officers should look to accomplish primary source or original research and writing as part of their intellectual development and personal progress toward advanced degree attainment or publication. There are opportunities to coherently advance this goal over the course of a career, but again, many officers never envision them, as they are separated by years and by operational experience. What if officers could integrate their opportunities for research into a more tightly knit fabric?

## The Opportunities of a Career, Sometimes Neglected

The vision of the Officer Personnel Management System is to grow and develop adaptive leaders. Adaptive leaders are “sufficiently broad in education and

experience to operate across the spectrum of conflict, and ... culturally astute and able to use this awareness and understanding of foreign environments to innovate in mission execution.”<sup>10</sup> The professional development opportunities provided by the Army to an officer alongside his or her self-development should work to fulfill this vision of developing an adaptive leader.

This development begins with undergraduate education—in all of its diversity—during which the initial habits of academic discipline—the ability to research and to write—are established and language and cultural education are introduced. Most officers gain their only foreign language understanding in secondary school or during undergraduate years as a degree requirement. This undergraduate language education is the foundation on which later graduate or Defense Language Institute foreign language education is built. It also is a window into other cultures.

One of the critical considerations for any officer’s long-term development is whether to apply for and accept the service obligation of funded graduate education accomplished for the needs of the Army. The debate about whether this time away from operational assignments is worth it is too large for the confines of this article. The point here is that the Army affords officers the opportunity to earn advanced degrees, both masters and doctorates, and this opportunity needs to be carefully considered in the plan an officer develops for his or her own professional education.

If this opportunity is taken, it provides both for increased foreign language capability and cultural awareness—priorities indicated by the professional development vision—and for in-depth primary research and writing. This opportunity to research and write needs to be incorporated into the lifelong approach already established as necessary.

Throughout the time line of an officer’s career, the Army offers fellowships that afford additional broadening and research opportunities. These can come prior to ILE or senior service college, and they need to be considered in the panoply of options afforded to officers. They become particularly important if one views them as part of a continuum spanning from undergraduate education through the stages of PME and funded graduate education, with a holistic progression through all of these stages. If one were to conduct original research and writing on constant

subjects of inquiry throughout these stages in continuous fashion, it could be very powerful.

Another way the Army has provided an opportunity for officers to progress in their education is to create a program to gain a doctor of philosophy degree through the School of Advanced Military Studies’ Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program. This program will provide the Army with leaders capable and educated in strategic thought, who gain all the advantages of completing original research and writing a dissertation. This program seems to be the pinnacle of broadening opportunities afforded by the Army.

Taking advantage of these career-broadening opportunities for education often takes moral courage to confront the rigors of time lines and military anti-intellectualism. It takes a conscious judgment as to when the time exists to apply for, compete for, and succeed at a funded graduate opportunity or fellowship. The best officers are always needed by their commanders and their branches to meet the incessant requirements of the operational Army, and they must fight to go to funded graduate school or compete for a fellowship. This takes the courage to see the chance and decide to take it—often against the advice of a mentor who did not take that path or did not have the same opportunities. The decision also works against peer pressure, which resists academic and intellectual achievement. It takes great confidence in one’s potential and a vision for possibility to opt for graduate school or a fellowship.

The highest and most current guidance, as fulfilled by the Officer Personnel Management System vision above, makes clear the need for high-level intellectual development and broadening. Through advanced education, research and writing, and active and continuous self-development, officers can fulfill the vision by developing the special abilities required to solve complex global problems requiring language, interagency, and cultural awareness skills.

## **Achieving a Solution for a Lifelong Self-Development Plan**

So, how does an officer tie all these considerations together into a coherent personal self-development concept? One of the primary elements must be for officers to look forward over the course of their careers and conceptualize how all of these components fit together. How can they integrate the course of their desired sequence





of PME with the objectives they achieve in their self-development plan? The beginning point is interest. What subject of original research piques their interest? Which one might be a potential subject for career investigation? Which subject would merit continuous personal investigation in the research opportunities afforded at the various PME institutions, such as the master of military art and science thesis at the Command and General Staff Officers' Course or the monograph at the School of Advanced Military Studies? A carefully selected topic could carry forward to be continued as a strategic research paper at the Army War College, or it could be pursued in individual research efforts during a senior service college fellowship.

Instead of taking these research opportunities discretely, they should be viewed as a continuum. With a determined topic of interest, intentionality, and diligence, Army officers can build academic expertise over the course of time, taking advantage of career research and writing opportunities. Instead of several incoherent PME writing requirements, by wise choice and a forward view, officers can build the components of a book or a dissertation by incorporating their research together over time.

Graduates of the 2016 Command and General Staff College Art of War Scholars program (from left) Maj. Zach Alessi-Friedlander, U.S. Army; Maj. Bishane Whitmore, U.S. Air Force; Maj. Roland Minez, U.S. Army; Maj. John Zdeb, U.S. Army; Maj. Ian Brandon, New Zealand Army; and Lt. Brian Juskiewicz, U.S. Navy, celebrate their accomplishments with Dr. Wendell C. King, dean of academics, 10 June 2016 as they transition to a program of self-development after leaving Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. (Photo courtesy of author)

Establishing such a research and writing trajectory can also take into account the deliberate development of expertise to be used in retirement. The ideal solution is to use terminal assignments to finalize *bona fides* for retirement employment and to position oneself geographically or by subject expertise for the transition. This foresight can align professional success along the way. With this in mind, there are several key questions officers should consider early in their careers:

**In what area of the world do I want to specialize?**

The Department of Defense organizes the world geographically by combatant command. Each command is complex enough that one officer cannot know everything.

## Military Review

# WE RECOMMEND



### Self-Development Handbook



**T**he *Army Self-Development Handbook* draws on lessons from the field, from educational and leadership research, and from applicable Army regulations and doctrine to provide state-of-the-art guidance on designing and implementing a program of self-development. This handbook can help individual soldiers reach the highest levels of professionalism. For online access, visit: [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/Repository/Materials/CAL\\_Self-DevHandbook.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/Repository/Materials/CAL_Self-DevHandbook.pdf).

Focused reading and research by region allows individuals to build regional expertise in support of Army rotational unit objectives, and to build the regional knowledge most useful as senior officers in the combatant commands.

**What specific cultural expertise is appropriate given that regional focus?** The Army professional development vision clearly states that cultural expertise is an important professional development objective. Cultural expertise enables the regional expertise required by leaders of Army rotational units. The promotion board guidance for recent major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel boards all listed the characteristic of being “able to understand the socio-economic environment and [to be] *culturally astute* [emphasis added] in order to successfully operate in complex, uncertain environments” among the key characteristics required by strategic leadership.<sup>11</sup> The lieutenant colonel board also included prescriptive language guiding the board to not penalize officers engaged in civilian education or fellowships, in keeping with this article’s emphasis on the importance of outside education.<sup>12</sup>

**What foreign language ability aligns with this regional and cultural expertise?** Ideally, this language ability began during secondary school or while an undergraduate, but officers can choose a language ability to develop while at graduate school or during self-development or resident education from the Defense Language Institute. Ultimately, joint task force commanders with language ability in the region to which they deploy are best suited to integrate with multinational teams.

**What area of operational expertise aligns with this regional, cultural, and language ability that will establish the officer as a resident expert in a senior staff at an Army service component or regional combatant command?** Will the officer develop expertise as a cyber, electronic warfare, force protection, fires, or logistics specialist, among others? This expertise is what is expected of lieutenant colonels as senior leaders on service component or joint staffs, and lieutenant colonel is the expected rank at which officers retire or decide to pursue further senior leadership.

Officers are encouraged to begin with the end in mind. Officers currently on active duty must realize that the day comes for all to retire, whether as a major or a general. We all reach the end of the road for our active military career. Too often, we arrive at that point without any clear concept or preparation for what comes next. The optimum solution would be to be in a geographic location or position of experience in our last duty posting to make a natural transition into what will be our second career. The optimum solution would be to honestly



evaluate what we wanted to do when military retirement was reached and to use our educational opportunities, self-development plan, and operational experience to work toward that perceived occupation. The wise choice of research and writing topics over the course of a career ensures continuity and achieves published writing useful in the retirement transition. The same need applies to those who separate short of retirement—for the transition to be seamless and continuous, especially with a final assignment, and to leave the service with expertise in doing what an officer loves to do and is best educated to do.

Obviously, this is not a solution that will work for everyone or in all situations. Not all officers will be able

to envision a research topic that will enthrall them or connect to contiguous opportunities over time, but even if they see increased coherence, the conceptualization is worth it. New visions will emerge over time. Much of this potential achievement revolves around intentionality and diligence by the officer concerned. Some of this potential achievement revolves around raw talent and honest self-reflection. But, the skills of honesty, reflection, and intentionality required by this expanded professional self-development concept, integrating all Army educational and broadening opportunities over a career, will be amply demonstrated by our most forward-looking officers. ■

## Notes

1. Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 3 December 2014), 5–6.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 9.

4. Ibid., 6.

5. In addition to the references cited in these notes, the following primary sources from Human Resources Command (HRC) were consulted: Chief of Staff, Memorandum to the Deputy Chief of Staff, "Fiscal Year 2016 Centralized Selection List (CSL) Command and Key Billet Slating Guidance," 26 June 2014, accessed 20 December 2016, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/OPMD/FY16%20CSA%20SLATING%20GUIDANCE.pdf> (CAC required); Chief of Staff, Memorandum to the Deputy Chief of Staff, "Fiscal Year 2017 Centralized Selection List Command and Key Billet Slating Guidance," 10 September 2015, accessed 20 December 2016, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/OPMD/FY17%20CSA%20CSL%20Slating%20Guidance%20-%20Approved%2010%20SEP%2015.pdf> (CAC required); U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Senior Service College/Fellowship/Foreign Service School Information, Academic Year 2016-2017, accessed 20 December 2016, [https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/OPMD/AY16-17\\_SSC\\_Catalog.pdf](https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/OPMD/AY16-17_SSC_Catalog.pdf) (CAC required). Information provided in this catalog gives a brief description and pertinent facts regarding each senior service college opportunity, to include fellowships and foreign schools; U.S. Army HRC, MILPER Message 16-101, "FY 16 Army Competitive Category (ACC) Intermediate Level Education Selection Board and Process for Submitting Intermediate Level Education Resident Attendance Preferences," 6 April 2016 (CAC required); MILPER Message 16-114, "FY 17 U.S. Army Human Resources Command Senior Professor of Military Science (PMS) Centralized Selection Board," 19 April 2016 (CAC required).

6. DA Pam 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, 6.

7. Ibid., 12.

8. Ibid.

9. For a comprehensive sense of the broad spectrum of broadening opportunities available through the Army, see the Officer Personnel Management Directorate Broadening Opportunities Program Catalog, updated 5 August 2015, accessed 9 January 2017, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/bop>.

10. DA Pam 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, 9.

11. Secretary of the Army, Memorandum for President and Promotion and Selection Board Members, "Fiscal Year 2015 (FY15) Major (MAJ), Army, Operations (OPS), Operations Support (OS), and Force Sustainment (FS) Promotion and Selection Boards (PSBs), 13 March 2015, 3, accessed 23 December 2016, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/TAGD/FY15%20Major,%20Army%20Competitive%20Category,%20Promotion%20Selection%20Board.pdf> (CAC required); Secretary of the Army, Memorandum for President and Selection Board Members, "Promotion List for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC), Operations (OPS), Operations Support (OS) and Force Sustainment (FS), Promotion Selection Boards (PSB), 22 October 2015, 3–4, accessed 23 December 2016, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/TAGD/1.%20FY16%20Lieutenant%20Colonel,%20Army%20Competitive%20Categories,%20Promotion%20Selection%20Board.pdf> (CAC required); Secretary of the Army, Memorandum for President and Selection Board Members, "Promotion Lists for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Colonel (COL), Operations (OPS), Operations Support (OS) and Force Sustainment (FS) Promotion Selection Boards (PSB)," 9 March 2015, 3, accessed 23 December 2016, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/Site/Protect/Assets/Directorate/TAGD/FY15%20Colonel,%20Army%20Competitive%20Category,%20Promotion%20Selection%20Board.pdf> (CAC required).

12. Secretary of the Army, Memorandum for President and Selection Board Members, "Promotion List for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, Lieutenant Colonel," 4.