

Making the Most of Resident Intermediate Level Education

A Decision Point Framework

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“**A**d Bellum Pace Parati!”¹ Since 1881, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and its predecessor institutions at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, have lived up to the motto of preparing field grade officers for war through education in an academic setting. Attending resident intermediate-level education (ILE) at CGSC is an opportunity that will give you dedicated time and space to think about the future of warfare. Attendance at CGSC is a significant milestone in the tradition of military professional development, following in the footsteps of leaders from President Dwight Eisenhower to retired Gen. Ann Dunwoody. In addition to the core curriculum, CGSC and partner institutions present a wealth of additional opportunities an officer can pursue. However, there is no time to do everything, especially while following the critical advice you will receive from mentors and when investing in your personal life and building relationships with peers.² Moreover, many of CGSC’s opportunities require decisions and initial actions very soon after your arrival, during which time the assignments process and simple adjustment to the new environment will compete for your attention. Thinking about your goals and the opportunities at

Fort Leavenworth will position you to make the most of your time there. This article offers a decision-point (DP) framework, defined as six decisions designed as tools to navigate these opportunities and capitalize on those that best nest with the demands of your future assignments and your long-term goals.

Before delving into the DP framework itself, it is important to understand the basic course structure. Resident ILE is a ten-month program that brings together officers from across the Army, the other uniformed services, and partner countries from around the globe. Classes traditionally begin in August, and students graduate in June (some students attend prerequisite courses earlier in the summer). Your first experience as an entire class will likely consist of approximately a week of orientation briefings, during which you will receive the most up-to-date guidance on the academic and extracurricular programs offered that year and the associated timelines. Arriving before your mandatory report date will help minimize friction and maximize your ability to engage early with program proponents during this period.

Following orientation, you will complete the three-and-a-half-month “common core” program consisting



Maj. Gen. David Doyle, commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division and Fort Carson, Colorado, conducts a briefing 18 October 2023 during a Command and General Staff College (CGSC) visit at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The Command and General Staff School is the largest among four academic schools within the CGSC, providing a master's-level curriculum to nearly five thousand Army majors and sister service and interagency personnel annually through the Command and General Staff Officer Course. Securing victory in the talent competition involves recruiting individuals with the readiness, team prowess, forward-thinking mentality, and peak collaborative skills needed for success. (Photo by Sgt. Scyrrus Corregidor, U.S. Army)

of classes in areas like history, leadership, force management, joint operations, and tactics. The common core program includes daily reading, written assignments, group exercises, and written and oral exams. Next, students complete the three-and-a-half-month Advanced Operations Course (AOC), consisting primarily of planning exercises with continued leadership and history instruction. Finally, during the last two to three months, students complete elective coursework in their chosen areas, some of which offer opportunities to earn Army skill identifiers. The small group of students selected for scholars' programs complete alternate curriculums instead of AOC and electives.³

One important recent change to resident ILE is that all students who successfully complete the course components now earn a Master in Operational

Studies degree. Students who complete a thesis alternatively earn a Master in Military Art and Science (MMAS) degree. The ability to earn a master's degree by completing the core curriculum alone impacts several of the DPs in this framework and may limit the utility of some of the degree-related advice from mentors who attended prior to the change. Considering the structure and degree opportunities of the core program at CGSC, we now turn to the key decision points surrounding the additional opportunities that can add depth and breadth to your experience.

Students must make six key decisions early during CGSC, displayed in chronological order in table 1. Some decisions will be an easy "yes" or "no" for you, but some decisions (like how to operationalize your education) require more personal reflection. This framework

Table 1. Decisions to Consider Early During CGSC

DP	Decision	When	If	Then	Else
1	SAMS	Early August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Right fit ✓ Career timeline ✓ Branch supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Apply in early August - Study for exam 	Transition to next decision
2	Certificate or Language	Mid-August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Right fit 	Apply in mid-August	Transition to next decision
3	Thesis	Mid-August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Right fit ✓ Topic passion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enroll in MMAS - Consider applying for Scholar program 	Transition to next decision
4	AIM Marketplace	Early September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Regular Army student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prioritize units and locations - Integrate your family - Contact units early 	Trust in the algorithm
5	Scholar Program	Mid-September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Enrolled in master of military art and science (MMAS) ✓ Right fit 	Apply according to program guidance	Transition to next decision
6	Operationalize Education	Late September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ You want to maximize your time at CGSC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use grounded theory to create personal SOPs 	Leave points on the table

(Table by authors)

informs any set of decisions you choose to make during CGSC. It helps you balance different priorities from simply graduating to getting a preferred follow-on assignment, to prioritizing family time, or to investing in additional academic opportunities.

DP1. Compete for the School of Advanced Military Studies

The Advanced Military Studies Program is also commonly referred to by its location at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). SAMS begins two weeks after the completion of the resident ILE course and keeps students at Fort Leavenworth for an additional year of critical thinking and staff officer training. SAMS students write a graduate-level monograph on an appropriate military topic in concert with a few hundred pages of weekly reading. The program selects approximately seventy Army students per year from the resident cohort of one thousand students, and completion of the Advanced Military Studies Program incurs a one-year utilization tour on a division, corps, or equivalent staff.

Whether to compete for SAMS is the first decision students should make because the application window opens and closes early. SAMS application processes can change, but prepare to take an entrance exam, submit an

entrance essay, and interview with a current SAMS instructor.⁴ Applicants can take the entrance exam as early as the first week of August, so prioritize exam preparation once you arrive at Fort Leavenworth. It's much better to complete your entrance exam before common core begins demanding more of your attention.

Students should remember that an extra year at Fort Leavenworth directly impacts their families and future unit assignments, so making this decision earlier enables you to synchronize all other decisions you make while at CGSC. Reach out to your mentors as soon as possible to help decide whether competing for SAMS is right for you and your family.

DP2. Enroll in a Degree, Certificate, or Language Course with a Partner Institution

In addition to the common curriculum, CGSC partners with multiple nearby universities to offer civilian degree and certification programs. Students have broad latitude to pursue a master's degree or certification in a field like business administration or a foreign language, whether through a partner institution or an institution of the student's choosing. Some language courses also earn CGSC elective credit and thereby reduce a student's course load during the spring elective

period. These programs vary significantly in their time requirements; a single language course will consume less bandwidth than a yearlong degree program. For many partner programs, enrollment begins in August and mostly ends in September. Although CGSC provides briefings on these programs during August orientation, students prioritize their educational goals well before arrival to best position themselves to make an informed decision.

The ability to pursue a civilian degree or certificate program during resident ILE is a significant opportunity for some officers, especially those who have not yet attained a master's degree. Many students enroll in these to broaden their skillset for civilian employment after the Army or to hone a skillset related to their military career path, especially those involving strategic languages. Some partner institutions hold classes on or near Fort Leavenworth, providing an in-person learning environment that may not be available if an officer pursues a degree through a different institution. Further, for most officers, the resident ILE year is the last opportunity to use tuition assistance to subsidize a master's degree or certification. Tuition assistance is unauthorized for professional degree programs and, with few exceptions, for a second degree or certificate at or below a degree level an officer has already attained.⁵ Thus, earning a Master in Operational Studies from CGSC will end the eligibility for tuition assistance for most officers.

Like the thesis program, enrolling in a certificate course adds to your CGSC workload without offsetting any common core requirements. While certificate programs do not exclude you from other major CGSC options, like writing a thesis or competing for a scholar program, each option requires significant work. Some students have successfully pursued outside

degree programs while also completing an MMAS thesis. However, before deciding on a degree, certificate, or language, consider the other CGSC options in this article and your nonacademic goals for your year at Fort Leavenworth.

DP3. Write a Thesis

Writing a thesis is a significant endeavor—and worth the effort if you're passionate about your thesis topic. As common core classes begin, you'll have the opportunity to enroll in the thesis writing class. Students who complete a thesis earn an MMAS, while students who solely complete the baseline curriculum earn a Master in Operational Studies degree.⁶ For an MMAS, students must write a graduate-level thesis somewhere between sixty and 150 pages on an appropriate general studies or history topic. The MMAS program provides immense value to students and the broader security community, but a thesis also carries significant up-front costs. MMAS students complete a series of thesis classes throughout the year to facilitate the research and writing process. Although the thesis classes earn elective credit, they present an additional time requirement during common core and AOC on top of the baseline curriculum and working on the thesis itself. Historically, the MMAS program begins with over two hundred students but tapers off to approximately seventy students.

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There are a few nonexhaustive reasons to write a thesis:

- You are individually passionate about researching a specific military topic.
- You have a future career goal that focuses on a specific region (e.g., U.S. Indo-Pacific Command), technology (e.g., autonomous systems), or national security issue (e.g., climate change).
- You have specific and unique knowledge about a military topic, region, technology, issue, and so on that others can learn and benefit from.
- You want to seize the time, space, and resources to develop a greater intellectual capacity and set of research skills.
- You want to apply for a scholars' program.

However, students can expect that the MMAS requires just as much work as the rest of the CGSC curriculum combined. Only personally important research tends to survive first contact with the common core workload. You should begin thinking about and researching potential thesis topics prior to orientation. Students who have not identified at least a general topic area by the start of classes face an uphill battle. You can always drop the thesis but cannot start it late. Successful thesis research questions range from questions like "When was Switzerland's military logistics readiness sufficient to deter foreign aggression during World War II?" to "Can the dynamics of modern non-lethal anti-access/area-denial warfare be modeled as a two-player wargame?"⁷

If you already have an exact topic in mind just reading this section, you should strongly consider writing a thesis for your own and the Army's benefit. MMAS theses are published through the Ike Skelton Library system and are available for future readers to benefit from your work.⁸ There is no limit to the number of current (and past) problems that the Army needs motivated soldier-scholars to study and solve.

Another excellent reason to write a thesis is that it is a requirement to compete for the Art of War Scholar program or Information Advantage Scholar program. Enrolling in the thesis program class and progressing on your initial chapters is a prerequisite for a competitive scholar application. (See DP5 for more on the scholars programs.)

Remember, students can still contribute to the profession without writing a full thesis. CGSC is

an ideal time for midcareer officers to expand their thinking, research, and writing skills. Not only are contributions to the profession highly encouraged by Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Randy George, but a hallmark of the officer corps is also an earnest desire to improve the military in a highly complex and fast-moving environment.⁹ Regardless of whether a student completes a thesis, *every* student should take advantage of the tremendous faculty, library, and other resources to write something valuable while at CGSC. Completing an MMAS thesis is one of the best ways to do this but by no means the only way.

DP4. How to Compete in the Marketplace

This is the no-fail decision for Army officers! (International students and officers who do not use the Army's marketplace can skip to DP5.) By the time you decide whether to apply for SAMS and write a thesis, it will be mid-August, and common core classes will occupy much of your attention. Competing in the marketplace can be time-consuming during common core as many units visit CGSC with information briefings, no-host socials, and interview schedules. The marketplace also moves fast! To compete efficiently in the assignment marketplace, consider the following simple techniques:

First, establish a clear list of priorities and understand your personal market decision support criteria. Consider what you want from the next five years of your career and synchronize that with personal considerations and parent branch guidance.

Here are some example marketplace criteria to consider, with an example preference table (see table 2).

- *Fact.* I want to serve in an armored brigade so that I'm more versatile for future wars.
- *Fact.* My spouse wants to live closer to her family in either Texas or Tennessee.
- *Assumption.* I will not be selected for SAMS.
- *Assumption.* Units will hire me for a specific battalion position.

Second, have your personal files ready. This means having an updated Assignment Interactive Module resume, access to your OERs, and a potential cover letter prepared.

Third, reach out to your network early to gauge your options. If you have an ideal assignment, reach

Table 2. Example Preference Table

#	Unit	Location	POC
1	Any BCT, 1st Cav. Div.	Fort Cavazos, Texas	1BCT commander
2	Any BCT, 3rd Inf. Div.	Fort Stewart, Georgia	Strength manager
3	Any BCT, 1st Ar. Div.	Fort Bliss, Texas	Cold call S1
...
X	<i>Listen to branch! Enumerate everything!</i>		

(Table by authors)

and October to work on your thesis to be competitive for selection.

There are multiple excellent reasons to compete for a scholar program. First and foremost, scholar seminar groups are a small subset of especially motivated and academically talented officers. Getting the opportunity to learn from and alongside them exponentially enhance

your CGSC experience while building a network of peers across the joint force. These relationships are lifelong and will provide you further opportunities to influence and improve how we fight.

out to your mentors to seek advice and support before the market opens.

The purpose of thinking through these steps is to separate the stress of marketplace competition from the first essays, exercises, and exams you will need to focus on in September and October. Writing down clear decision criteria allows you to be honest with units and ask specific questions to turn your assumptions into facts about topics like childcare, the training calendar, or follow-on opportunities at the same duty station. During interviews, units want to understand their position on your priority list, so it pays to have an operationalized answer.

Some branches and services do not use the marketplace. If you are in this category, utilize the additional time you gain to maintain and expand your professional network within your branch or service.

DP5. Apply for a Scholars Program

Of all the opportunities at CGSC, the scholars programs are the most unique. In lieu of electives and the advanced operations course, scholars pursue specialized curriculums after completing common core oral exams (right before Thanksgiving). The scholars programs typically provide dedicated writing periods that students can use to produce rich MMAS theses that are unavailable to MMAS thesis students outside of the scholars programs. However, the scholars' curriculums also carry their own heavy reading loads—scholars have substantial flexibility in using their time but must remain diligent to get the most out of a challenging and rewarding opportunity. Again, if you want to compete for scholar selection, you must have already enrolled in the thesis course per DP3. You'll want September

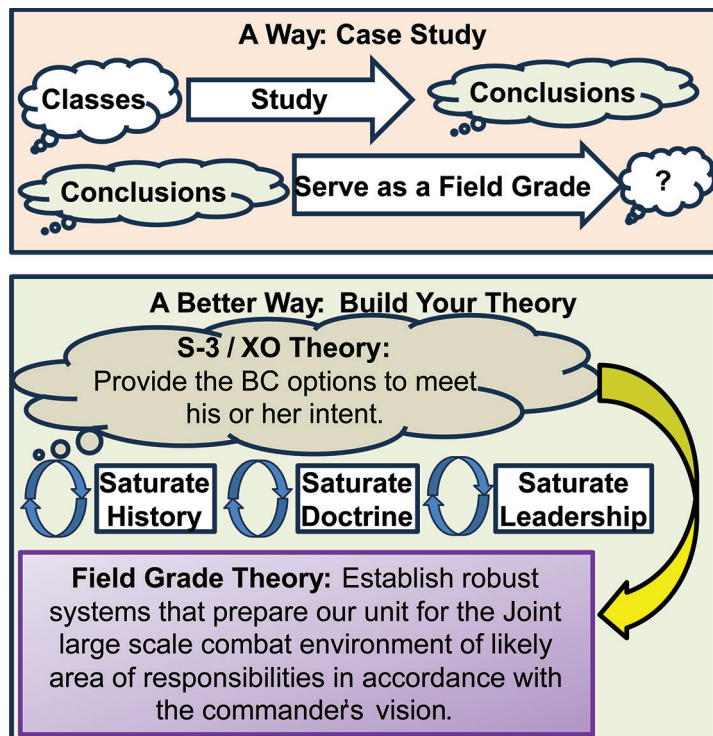
Currently, there are two scholars programs for students: the Art of War Scholars program and the Information Advantage Scholars program.¹⁰ The Art of War program is a detailed study of military history, theory, doctrine, and strategy, and students earn the strategist and military historian additional skill identifiers at the end of the program. With a reading load that might beat out SAMS, the challenging program develops critical thinkers and enhances research and writing skills. The Information Advantage program focuses on information-related capabilities and emerging technologies and spends a host of class time in a more classified setting.

Both programs give scholars unique access to research resources like the National Archives, experts in the respective academic fields, time with current operational units, staff rides, and an enhanced capacity to research, write, and revise for a quality MMAS thesis.

DP6. Operationalize Your Education

Finally, make the most of your CGSC experience by operationalizing your education. The core curriculum covers both impressive breadth and depth across the full range of leadership, tactics, history, sustainment, national strategy, and joint force structure topics. You will learn a lot at CGSC, which may sometimes feel overwhelming. Learning to operationalize your education makes the learning, reading, and writing benefit you and your future units.

A way to operationalize your education is by building your personal "theory of the Army" and improving



(Figure by authors)

Figure 1. Operationalized Education Roadmap

that theory throughout the school year. Without operationalizing your personal field grade theory, the CGSC curriculum is just a series of case studies whereby you gain siloed knowledge on different topics. You reflect on that knowledge later to inform your decisions, but figure 1 provides a better way tie your education to your future performance.¹¹ Spend a few minutes each day writing what you learned into your personal theory of Army success.

As an example, consider the following theory as a starting point for CGSC, and then we will practice iterating it during the academic year to arrive at our final theory.

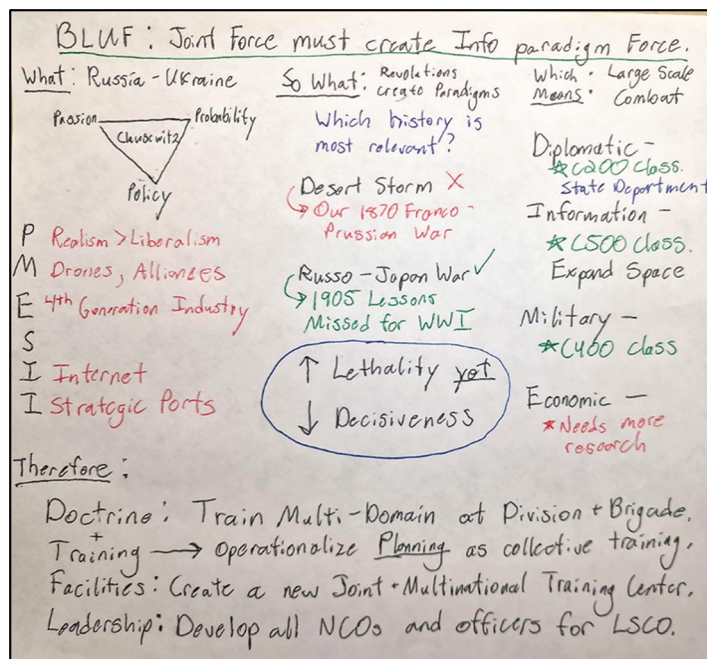
Say that a major attends CGSC with a working theory that to succeed as an S-3/XO, she should “provide the battalion commander options to meet his or her intent.” Write this theory down at the top of a landscape orientation piece of paper and revisit it at the end of each class.

In late August, after completing several foundational blocks of instruction, our fictional major

realizes that being an S-3/XO is merely a two-year portion of their likely decade of field-grade service and expands the theory to include the possibility of division or joint staff service. The major annotates this in the theory but stays with the general premise to provide options to their commander to support the commander’s intent.

At some point during common core, the major learns enough about Desert Storm and multidomain operations to expand the theory to focus on joint operations during large-scale combat operations. Sure, the major expects that most of their service will occur in garrison environments, but they have decided that the focus is still preparing to win as part of a joint task force.

During leadership, history, and force management classes, the major learns that vast organizations loom far above their headquarters and will have an outsized impact on the time, manner, and location of future conflicts. Our major realizes that preparation to win the next war likely already began sometime in the past decade, and it is their responsibility to synchronize daily tactical training with the Army’s overall strategic vision.



(Figure by authors)

Figure 2. Example Education Operationalization for a CGSC Student

As this major makes their other decisions from August to November, they realize that this working theory is much more useful for their future service than merely taking daily notes. With a little expounding on the Russo-Japanese war and maybe some discussion of the Kotter change model, our major expands the theory into their common core oral exam thesis—though as a true reflection of how CGSC has shaped their plans to successfully serve as a field-grade officer rather than a one-off exam topic idea. Figure 2 demonstrates this technique.

This is just an example of how to operationalize your CGSC education. Capturing what you learn at CGSC allows you to create a personal operating procedure for your decade of service to come. Regardless of

your process, setting aside time and mental energy to synthesize what you have learned is an essential part of growing as a field-grade officer throughout CGSC.

Conclusion

Resident CGSC is a special career opportunity in which students have the time and maneuver space to deepen their understanding of war and shape their ability to influence it. Nothing in this framework pressures you to sacrifice personal priorities to appease the ghost of officers past. This framework does allow you to understand your decisions and make deliberate ones. Why not get the most out of CGSC? Who knows, it might even be the best year of your life. ■

Notes

1. Latin for "Prepared in peace for war." See "Command and General Staff College and Combined Arms Center and Fort Leavenworth, Device," Institute of Heraldry, accessed 23 October 2024, <https://tioh.army.mil/Catalog/Heraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=11676&CategoryId=7001>.

2. Jon Michael King, "Six Ways to Maximize Resident CGSC," Field Grade Leader, 27 July 2019, <https://fieldgradeleader.themilitaryleader.com/best-year/>. King provides excellent general advice on making the most of the Command and General Staff College (CGSC); however, the subsequent recent addition of a master's degree to the core curriculum limits the direct applicability of his sixth point.

3. The curriculum of CGSC is subject to change year to year; however, students will likely continue to conduct three blocks throughout the year: common core, Advanced Operations Course (AOC), and electives. Students who achieve entry into a scholars program will likely continue to conduct common core but not AOC and electives.

4. For additional information, visit the School of Advanced Military Studies website at <https://armyuniversity.edu/CGSC/SAMS/SAMS>.

5. Army Regulation (AR) 621-5, *Army Continuing Education System* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 28 October 2019), para. 4-3, para. 4-5. The exceptions to the general prohibition on using tuition assistance for a second program at or below the same degree level include but are not limited to classes related to an initial teacher certification, certain specialized chaplain certificates, and certain nondegree language classes for languages identified as Department of Defense strategic languages.

6. "Degree Programs," CGSC, accessed 23 October 2024, <https://armyuniversity.edu/CGSC/DegreePrograms>. Earning a master's degree while at CGSC is a recent change to the program. Officers who attended prior to 2023 may have a different concept of CGSC schoolwork due to differing accreditation requirements to earn the degree. This is important to keep in mind when making decisions based on the advice of others who attended CGSC prior to its accreditation.

7. Research questions of Maj. Alex Gordon and Maj. Joseph "Cagy" Brundidge, Art of War Scholars, Academic Year 2024.

8. "Master of Military Art and Science Theses," Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library, accessed 23 October 2024, <https://cdm16040.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll2>.

9. Randy George, Gary Brito, and Michael Weimer, "Strengthening the Profession: A Call to Army Leaders to Revitalize our Professional Discourse," Modern War Institute, 11 September 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/strengthening-the-profession-a-call-to-all-army-leaders-to-revitalize-our-professional-discourse/>.

10. Dean A. Nowowiejski, "The Challenge and Opportunity of Scholars Programs at the Command and Staff General College," *Journal of Military Learning* 5, no. 1 (April 2021), <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Journal-of-Military-Learning/Journal-of-Military-Learning-Archives/April-2021/Nowowiejski-Scholars-Program/>.

11. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications), 650.