



Fellowship Program Offers Sergeants Major a Master's Degree in Education

By Martha C. Koester

NCO Journal

Twenty sergeants major will soon have an opportunity to teach the next generation of sergeants major through a fellowship program at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, worth \$27,000 per student. The one-year education program offers fellows a master's degree in adult education from Pennsylvania State University and an additional three years' service in the Army.

During the Army drawdown when job security is at a premium, the fellowship program offers an opportunity for qualified active-duty senior noncommissioned officers to become an ambassador of the Army in the classroom who will help to develop agile, adaptive and innovative leaders of the future. Though no specific career management field is sought, the cross-section of students will face an advanced curriculum to better professionalize senior NCO instructors in the classroom.

Under the fellowship program, 20 fellows will have one year to focus exclusively on completing a master's degree

in adult education, along with a couple of one-week certification courses to be an instructor. After fellows receive their master's degree, they will perform three years as an instructor in the Sergeants Major Course.

"The world is more complex, and it gets more so every day. Part of what the Army wrestles with is just how complex," said Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Defreese, commandant of USASMA. "It really is hard to get ahead of what social media does. Drone use is getting to be where journalists will use it, maybe hovering over a battlefield watching what our Soldiers do real-time. ... Add that to megacities that just go on forever, with huge tunnel systems and subways, and then adding cyber [security into the equation]."

"We need to have critical, adaptive, agile thinkers as sergeants major, and that really starts with their whole career, not just the institutional education, but what they get out of their organization and self-development," Defreese said. When they come here, our focus will be

education and critical thinking. Our instructors have to be world-class.”

USASMA is undergoing a \$6.5 million renovation to classrooms, which includes information technology upgrades.

“We’re putting a lot of money into continuing to keep us moving forward in the 21st century with technology and how people learn, so it only makes sense to couple the technology with the best instructors that we possibly can,” Defreese said.

Transforming education

Greenlighted by officials such as Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, chief of staff of the Army, and then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey, and Institute for NCO Professional Development Director Aubrey Butts, Defreese said the fellowship program is a collaborative effort. The fellowship is part of Secretary of the Army John McHugh and Odierno’s commitment to transforming Army education. It quickly went from an initiative, to a proposal, to an approved program in the span of six months.

“I briefed Gen. David G. Perkins [commanding general, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command] on this fellowship at the AUSA convention in October, and he said, ‘This is a no-brainer; I don’t know why we’re not already doing it,’” Defreese said.

“I served seven years as an instructor in the Sergeants Major Course in and out of uniform. ... After I retired and became a contract instructor, I earned a master’s degree in business administration and a master’s in education,” said Sylvester Smith, director of Strategic Plans and manager of the fellowship program. “With all the skills I obtained from the education degree, I was able to be a much better instructor because I understood all the dynamics of education theory and other skills, and I was able to apply it in the classroom. It made me much better at my job. From my experience, I believe an education degree is the right choice.”

A new standard

Current guidelines do not include educational requirements for sergeant major instructors at USASMA, so it’s hit or miss on the level of instruction, Defreese said.

“The American Council of Education, or ACE, takes into consideration that we [at USASMA] don’t have a degree requirement for our instructors,” Defreese said. “We will, in the future, which will help students get their degrees quicker, besides [raising] the level of instruction [for students].”

It’s “hit or miss” on the level of education students receive because some sergeants major may not have an aptitude to teach, Defreese said.

“As the final selector for instructors coming [to USASMA], you don’t know it by a photo or by their

records whether or not they even have the aptitude to teach,” he said. “They could be a great leader and just not have the aptitude.”

Though educational requirements are not necessary, most sergeants major have a significant amount of college by the time they have graduated from USASMA, and experience as senior leaders.

“As you get [new sergeant major instructors] through the fellowship program, they will be relevant and current with what’s going on in the Army,” Defreese said. “[The pool of instructors] will be fresher — a group that’s coming in with the experience and relevance [that is necessary for the job].”

“This is another way to make the skills consistent across the board by having an education degree,” Smith said. “It’s not just about getting a master’s degree; research shows that teachers with a background in education generally are better teachers than just those with the content knowledge, because we know not all math experts can teach math. ... With a background in education, I was a much better instructor and understood my way around in the classroom. I understood how to transfer that knowledge on to the students with an education degree, so it’s about standardizing the type of education, and then built into that degree are the tools that [students] can use immediately and apply in the classroom when they get there.”

Savings for the Army

Not only does the fellowship program offer students advantages, it also helps save the Army money in moving costs.

“In most of the degree completion programs, the student would go off to the university regardless of where it is, and then once they would get their first assignment, then they would have to [leave] again,” Smith said. “[This program] saves the Army money — only one permanent change of station, or PCS, cost — and we have people here who can mentor and work with them through this program as they complete it in that year.”

With the current makeup of instructors at USASMA at two per classroom — one military and one civilian associate professor — the fellowship program will also save money through the eventual non-renewal of civilian instructor contracts, said Jesse McKinney, director of Human Resources at USASMA.

“We have a total of 67 green-suit sergeants major authorized to us for the Sergeant Major Course, of which when we have a full load, it’s 45 classrooms, 45 green suiters, 45 civilians,” he said. “We haven’t had a full load as of recently, but another point that we will be able to arrive at with this program is either reduction or elimination of the civilian contracts so that we can have all green suiters on our [teaching] platform.”

Plans also call for expanding the fellowship program to the Sergeants Major Nonresident Course, so that the

curricula are the same as well as how they are instructed, Defreese said. Ultimately, the intent is that the program is a long-term solution to move education forward for senior-enlisted Soldiers.

“It’s 20 fellows a year going in starting the fellowship; 20 fellows each year will graduate. At the end of three years, I will have 60 sergeants major with master’s degrees in adult education,” Defreese said. “So at that point, I will have two master’s-level instructors in each classroom.”

Applications are due March 20. A panel will meet April 13-17 at Human Resources Command in Fort Knox, Ky., to produce an order-of-merit list of candidates. Defreese will make the final selections, which will be announced by April 30. Classes are set to begin Aug. 24.

“It doesn’t mean that we don’t still expect our sergeants major to get down in the trenches with their Soldiers and get dirty, but we really want them to be critical thinkers and to be part of the solution for the future and not dead weight,” Defreese said. “We’ve got to keep up.

“General officers and senior NCOs across the Army are excited about this, extremely excited,” he said. “There is nobody I have talked to that thinks this is a bad idea.”

Meanwhile, USASMA at Fort Bliss lacks instructors for the coming year.

“We have to fill [20] seats in the fellowship and also

our seats for the Sergeant Major Course for this coming year, so the folks who may be interested should consider applying up-front because they could at the end of the day receive orders to come to USASMA to be an instructor here anyway,” McKinney said.

How to apply for the fellowship program

Among the requirements, interested applicants of the Sergeants Major Academy Fellowship Program must be active Army sergeants major and must be able to complete full fellowship and utilization without interruption; possess a bachelor’s degree or higher from an accredited institution with a grade-point average of 3.0 or higher; and must be able to pass the Army physical fitness test and be U.S. citizens, according to military personnel, or MILPER, message 15-045.

Applications must be turned in by March 20 via e-mail to Joel D. Strout at Human Resources Command. Strout’s e-mail address is joel.d.strout.civ@mail.mil. The subject of the e-mail should be “Request to compete for the USASMA Fellowship Program.” Please refer to MILPER message 15-045 for the full contents of the application packet.

All education expenses for selected fellows, including the application fee, tuition and books, will be paid for by the Department of the Army. ■



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