



The David L. Stone Education Center on Joint Base Lewis McChord, WA. The education center houses five different colleges and universities and offers multiple undergraduate and graduate level programs. (Photo courtesy of Central Washington University)

# Civilian Education and NCOs

*By Staff Sgt. Alan J. Brutus*

Army University Press

**A**s the culture of the Army continuously evolves, so must the mindset and skillset of the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps. The Army is now, more than ever, placing an increased emphasis on higher-level civilian education among the enlisted force. This is evident with the establishment of Army University and the Army's desire to align military training with civilian education credentialing standards (Kem & Hotaling, 2017). One goal of this action is an increased number of transferrable college credits as a result of military training.

There is a common understanding among current and future NCOs that one way to get an advantage when it comes to promotions is pursuance or possession of a college degree. Aside from being beneficial for promotions, higher levels of civilian education can benefit NCOs through the development of enhanced critical thinking

skills and increased job performance. In addition to benefits while serving in the military, Soldiers can also profit from a college education upon completion of their military service by increasing their job prospects and becoming immediately hireable.

## Higher-Level Critical Thinking

The ability to comprehend Army doctrine is an essential quality of an NCO. Even more important is the ability to put this knowledge of doctrine into practice. This is where the ability to apply critical thinking skills is necessary. Critical thinking is the "process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action" ("Defining Critical Thinking" n.d., para. 3). The skills



Students work as a team using their collective experiences to solve complex problems. The students attending the Basic Leader Course at the Fort Bliss NCO Academy discuss how to solve the puzzle to meet the objective. (Photo by David Crozier, NCOLCOE)

that make up this definition are imperative for NCOs to be successful in both training and combat.

Pursuance of a higher education can play a significant role in an NCO's ability to apply critical thinking skills throughout their military career. While some universities offer courses specific to the development of critical thinking skills, it is the culmination of all coursework that truly develops an individual's ability to think critically about a situation and make an informed decision about a course of action to achieve the desired results.

Typically, in order to earn a college degree of any level, students are required to write research papers. Aside from developing a greater understanding of a specific subject, the process involved in writing a research paper develops not only critical thinking skills, but also one's ability to conduct thorough research. College-level research papers provide the chance for a structured approach to developing ideas and writing, which in turn support higher thought processes (Goodwin, 2004).

Another way college courses enhance these skills is through collaborative assignments such as group projects. Group proj-

ects provide students the opportunity to exchange ideas amongst peers and take responsibility for their contributions. Styron (2014) explains that these are two qualities which help foster critical thinking. The Army is a team that relies on group cohesion to accomplish missions, comparable to college-level group projects. The ability to collaborate with fellow NCOs in training and combat, while taking responsibility for their assigned tasks, make an NCO a valuable member of the team.

One of the six principles of *U.S. Army Mission Command* is exercising disciplined initiative (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014a). McBride and Snell (2017) explain that exercising disciplined initiative is the ability of a leader to make timely decisions and take actions to meet the desired end state provided by the commander's intent. Based on the above definition of critical thinking, NCOs who possess these skills are better able to make the decisions necessary to create an increased level of lethality for themselves, their Soldiers, and their unit and ultimately fulfill the commander's intent.

Higher-level critical thinking skills also enhance an NCO's ability to train their Soldiers. Although there are training events that follow precise guidance such as morning physical readiness training, weapon ranges, and gunnery tables, NCOs are charged with providing all training to their subordinates. One challenge that many NCOs face throughout their career is developing training that keeps Soldiers interested and engaged. NCOs with enhanced critical thinking skills can engage with new ideas and find it easier to develop innovative and more engaging training events that fall outside the norm to which Soldiers have become accustomed.



Two dozen schools, universities and employment organizations offered information on education and career opportunities in healthcare and healthcare-related fields to more than 300 service members, DA civilians and military spouses who attended the Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center Education Fair Dec. 7, 2017 at Fort Hood, Texas. (U.S. Army photo by Patricia Deal, CRDAMC Public Affairs)

## Job Performance

The Army has a selection of more than 150 Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) for enlisted Soldiers (“Careers and Jobs,” n.d.) in fields ranging from medical to human resources to combat arms. Regardless of MOS, there is a college-level degree that can enhance any NCO’s ability to be an effective leader in their respective career field. This does not mean NCOs should only pursue a degree related to their MOS, as nobody stays in the Army forever.

NCOs working in non-combat arms career fields will likely have an easier time finding colleges and universities that offer degree majors that directly correlate to their MOS than those who are in combat arms career fields. For example, while some institutions offer degree majors in human resources management, one would be hard pressed to find a degree in infantry skills at any institution of higher education. Although specific degree majors may not completely align with combat arms career fields, this should not discourage those NCOs from striving for higher education. All NCOs are leaders and can enhance their basic and advanced leadership skills through degrees such as business management and organizational leadership. *Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-25, U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2015) states for infantrymen, “Activities like professional reading or college courses help senior NCOs develop organizational leadership skills needed to coach, teach, and mentor Soldiers” (p. 25). Similar verbiage is found throughout this pamphlet for the various enlisted career fields throughout the Army.

NCOs who possess a degree directly related to their MOS can find themselves working with a higher level of job performance. For example, the skills learned while pursuing a degree in communications can prove valuable to public affairs NCOs when developing a commander’s communications plan. Related tasks included in *Field Manual 3-61, Public Affairs Operations* are the development of public affairs objectives and desired outcomes, identifying specified publics, and developing themes and messages to name a few (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014b). These are the same skills learned while taking a crisis communication or public relations class in college. This is not to say NCOs without this knowledge are incapable of providing valuable input and guidance in these situations, but rather to stress that NCOs with higher level civilian education related directly to their career field bring a broader knowledge base to the discussion.



Master Sgt. Ramiro R. Cantu, noncommissioned officer in charge of Madigan Army Medical Center’s consolidated education division, is presented his master’s degree during the first combined college graduation ceremony for Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Feb. 3, 2012. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. James Hale)

## Promotions

### NCO Professional Development System

Since the implementation of Select, Train, Educate, Promote (STEP) in 2016, Soldiers and NCOs must now complete appropriate levels of professional military education before being considered fully qualified for promotion (“Select-Train-Educate-Promote,” 2015). Additionally, there have been changes to the graduation requirements for the various leadership courses from the Basic Leaders Course through the Sergeants Major Course.

All levels of the noncommissioned officer professional development system are integrating writing into their curriculum. Soldiers begin learning the writing process during the Basic Leaders Course with the newly required end of course reflection essay and continue to hone their skills throughout all levels of Professional Military Education (Crozier, 2018). The Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Center of Excellence follows the American Psychological Association style of writing for all researched writing assignments, the same format a number of colleges and universities use as their requirement for research papers. NCOs who pursue higher-level civilian education will gain valuable experience in this style of writing and build confidence in their ability to properly construct a research paper prior to attending NCO Academies.

### Boards

For junior enlisted and NCOs preparing for semi-centralized promotion or Soldier or NCO of the month boards, a college education can aid in a number of ways. Typically, these boards consist of a series of questions from senior NCOs to the individual—similar to a civilian





Not letting a spare moment go to waste, a medic studies during a break in the action at the 2017 Madigan Army Medical Center's Best Medic Competition at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Tacoma, WA, on July 25, 2017. (Photo by John Liston)

job interview. Board preparation includes studying the various topics found on the specific board memorandum of instruction (MOI). College courses require students to study to be prepared for weekly assignments, research papers, and exams. The study habits and methods developed throughout a college education can assist Soldiers and NCOs in the studying required for success when attending both competitive and promotion boards.

Upon successful completion of a promotion board, there is another advantage to pursuing a college education: Colleges and universities award three semester credit hours for most classes a student completes. The Army awards two promotion points per semester credit hour of civilian education up to 135 points for promotion to sergeant and 160 points for promotion to staff sergeant (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2017). For those trying to increase their number of promotion points, one completed college class typically equates to six promotion points.

Regarding centralized promotion boards, civilian education is one way NCOs can set themselves apart from their peers and significantly increase their chances of being selected for the next higher rank. The 2018 sergeant first class field after-action report states that those who consistently sought self-improvement in areas such as civilian education were viewed favorably by board members (Department of the Army, 2017). Similar verbiage can be found on previous years' after action reports as well.

## Post-Military Employment

Every career in the Army has an expiration date. For some, this comes at the end of one enlistment term while others will go on to serve 20 years or more. NCOs must plan for the future and understand what is necessary to be marketable in the civilian employment sector. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) show that unemployment rates for those possessing only a high school diploma are 4 percent compared to those with a bachelor's degree at 2.5 percent. This is important because work experience is only a portion of what employers look for when reviewing resumés of potential future employees. By 2020, 64 percent of jobs will require education levels higher than a high school diploma (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2018).

The military career of an NCO cannot be understated, as it will affect the lives of subordinate Soldiers through their guidance, leadership, and mentorship. The reality is, the Army is not likely to be the only career a Soldier will have in their lifetime. If an NCO initially enlisted into the active duty component of the Army upon graduation of high school, they become eligible to retire around the age of 38, while the standard retirement age in the United States starts at 62. This leaves NCOs who serve 20 years in the Army directly following high school graduation 24 years to pursue a second career before reaching the national standard retirement age. Pursuing or possessing a college degree can be the difference in successfully finding a job or not in their search for post-military employment.

## Conclusion

Although the Army is placing increased emphasis on the enlisted force to a pursue higher-level civilian education, NCOs must realize the lifelong benefits to earning a college degree. The need for NCOs to pursue higher-level learning is certainly important, as it will aid in developing training, leading subordinates, and increased job performance. The various education benefits offered to Soldiers, such as tuition assistance and the G.I. Bill, make achieving a college education and the completion of a degree more attainable than ever. Pursuing a higher-level education is one way to enhance the overall skillset of an NCO, both during and after their time in service. ■

### Further Information:

**NCO Journal Podcast #3:**  
**Civilian Education**

---

## References

- Careers and jobs. (n.d.). *GoArmy.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.goarmy.com/careers-and-jobs.html>
- Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2018, January 31). Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020. *Georgetown University*. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>
- Crozier, D. (2018, September 14). Redesigning basic leader course: Changing paradigms. Retrieved from <http://ncolcoe.armylive.dodlive.mil/redesigned-basic-leader-course-changing-paradigms/>
- Defining critical thinking. (n.d.). *The Foundation for Critical Thinking*. Retrieved from <https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766>
- Department of the Army. (2017, June 23). *Field after action report-fiscal year 2018 (FY18) regular Army (RA) and Army reserve active guard reserve (AGR) sergeant first class (SFC) promotion board*. [Memorandum]. Retrieved from <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/nco-journal/docs/2019/February/Education/FY17-SFC-Board-Field-AAR.pdf>
- Goodwin, B. (2014, April). Research says / teach critical thinking to teach writing. *Educational Leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr14/vol71/num07/Teach-Critical-Thinking-to-Teach-Writing.aspx>
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. (2014a, March). *ADP 6-0: Mission command*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. (2014b, April). *FM 3-61: Public affairs operations*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. (2015, September 11). *D.A. Pam 600-25: U.S. Army noncommissioned officer professional development guide*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. (2017, April 25). *AR 600-8-19: Enlisted promotions and reductions*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Kem, J., & Hotaling, A. T. (2017, April). What is Army University supposed to do and how is it going so far? *Journal of Military Learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Journal-of-Military-Learning/Journal-of-Military-Learning-Archives/April-2017-Edition/What-is-Army-University-Supposed-to-Do-and-How-Is-It-Going-So-Far/>
- McBride, D. M., Jr., & Snell, R. L. (2017, January 9). Applying mission command to overcome challenges. *Army.mil*. Retrieved from [https://www.army.mil/article/179942/applying\\_mission\\_command\\_to\\_overcome\\_challenges](https://www.army.mil/article/179942/applying_mission_command_to_overcome_challenges)
- Select-Train-Educate-Promote. (2015, August 24). *Army.mil*. Retrieved from [https://www.army.mil/standto/archive\\_2015-08-24](https://www.army.mil/standto/archive_2015-08-24)
- Styron Jr, R. A. (2014). Critical thinking and collaboration: A strategy to enhance student learning. *Journal of Systemics*, 12(7), 25-30. Retrieved from [http://www.iiisci.org/journal/CV\\$/sci/pdfs/EI597JP12.pdf](http://www.iiisci.org/journal/CV$/sci/pdfs/EI597JP12.pdf)
- Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment. (2018, March 27). *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/emp/chart-unemployment-earnings-education.htm>

---

**Staff Sgt. Alan Brutus** is a public affairs mass communication specialist currently assigned to the Army University Press and NCO Journal. He previously served as a team leader in the 13th Public Affairs Detachment at Fort Hood, Texas and as a Broadcast NCO at the American Forces Network-Pacific at Yongsan, Republic of Korea. He holds a bachelor's degree in communications from Waldorf University and is currently pursuing a master's degree in communications at Purdue University.

---



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>  
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

