



Staff Sgt. Shenea Andrews, the chaplain assistant noncommissioned officer in charge for the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Sustainment Brigade, 101st Abn. Div., walks across the stage of Wilson Theater, June 9, 2017, to receive her bachelor's degree during the joint graduation ceremony on Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Andrews, a Tampa, Florida native, began her quest to earn her bachelor's degree nearly nine years ago during a deployment to Iraq. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Neysa Canfield/101st SBDE Public Affairs)

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NCO Journal Education Essay

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Since I joined the Army, I've heard it argued that a college education is not a requirement to be a Noncommissioned Officer (NCO); though college credits are worth promotion points, a degree is not a prerequisite to becoming a successful squad leader, team leader, or platoon sergeant. However, I enlisted some time ago, and the number of educational resources available to Soldiers makes completion of a degree program, regardless of operational tempo, an achievable goal that can benefit a service member during and after their enlistment. The purpose of this paper is to examine multiple avenues towards the goal of completing a degree while in the U.S. Army and discussing some of the options for financing an education outside of traditional means.

Background

My original objective when I joined the Army was to be the first person in my family to graduate from college. My mother and father had both attended some college courses but had not completed a degree. I joined the active duty Army in the nineties when the two leading education benefits advertised were the Montgomery G.I. Bill and the Army College Fund. When I enlisted, I was eligible for the G.I. Bill, but not for the College Fund, as my vision limited me to a certain number of military occupational specialties. Nevertheless, I enlisted, and for my service earned \$14,400.00 for college.

Traditional Learning

Not long after completing basic training and advanced individual training, I started looking into opportunities for further study. For Soldiers who have the time and the desire to obtain credits in a classroom environment, there are opportunities available. While serving on active duty, I found out about Liberty University and their courses available via distance learning, which I will discuss further below. After

completing six credits through Liberty, I attended classes through Campbell University, headquartered in Buies Creek, North Carolina, but with a satellite campus at Fort Bragg. I was able to interact with my fellow students and to participate in face-to-face discussions with my instructor without having to make the drive from Fort Bragg to Buies Creek. Campbell University was very generous in awarding credits that I had obtained before my enlistment, through advanced placement and college level examination program tests, and for attending basic combat training and advanced individual training. After the initial award of credits, I completed an associate degree in under a year, taking classes in English Literature, Art History, and Computer Applications.

The education center at my current duty station, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, maintains offices of several colleges, most of which offer courses during lunch and after duty hours. There are administrators from several private and public institutions available during the work day to assist service members with applying for Federal Tuition Assistance and enrolling in courses.

Online Learning

Distance learning has come a long way since I came into the military back in the nineties; then the courses I took at Liberty University were delivered via video cassette, sent through the mail. Since then, online education opportunities have become ubiquitous; if a service member is more comfortable with the self-paced educational opportunity provided by online learning, there are ample opportunities to obtain an education through accredited universities using this method. I recently completed my second master's degree through Thomas Edison State University, part of New Jersey's

State University system. The school uses the Moodle engine - which is very similar to the Blackboard environment familiar to many soldiers and NCOs - to facilitate the submission of assignments and discussion between students and professors. The instructor facilitated discussion forums are like blog entries with comment threads for student responses; students upload documents to the site in Word format for grading. Like Campbell, Thomas Edison is extremely veteran friendly and is substantially less expensive than many of the for-profit or private schools that offer education to service members. Advisors from Thomas Edison are available to conduct an evaluation of a service member's experience and education and will award credit towards a degree based on that assessment.

There is a downside to online education; a Soldier must be self-disciplined and committed to finishing a degree program; time management is essential. If the student is not disciplined and does not properly manage their time, they are less likely to succeed. There were times when I neglected my studies for extended periods of time and found myself staying up into the wee hours to catch up.

Hybrid Learning

If a service member wants the experience of interacting with other students face-to-face, but also enjoys the freedom allowed by online learning, some universities are offering hybrid courses. Many of the courses that I took while working on my first master's degree were a hybrid. For example; a professor was not available to lecture two nights a week, or the course was accelerated to facilitate degree completion, so material and lectures were posted to Rutgers University's Sakai learning platform - another platform similar to Blackboard. The instructors would post addresses recorded

in PowerPoint and accepted assignments via electronic upload. However, one night a week, students would meet in a classroom environment to engage in instructor facilitated discussion of course materials.

Another university offering a similar format is University of Maryland University College (UMUC). In addition to awarding service members credit based on their previous experience, UMUC also maintains campuses in many forward-deployed areas. The courses offered are often accelerated, enabling a service member to obtain credits in an expedited fashion. While in Afghanistan, I took courses through UMUC in Information Literacy and Graphic Presentation. Many of the adjunct instructors at UMUC are also service members; I taught a three-credit class in International Political Relations while deployed to the middle east. This course was primarily face-to-face but had an online component as well.

Funding Alternatives

If finances are the primary thing keeping a Soldier from completing his or her degree, options besides the Post 9/11 GI Bill and Federal Tuition Assistance exist. While on active duty, I served at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I wanted to get my associate degree before I left active duty, but didn't want to spend a lot of my money. While "attending" courses through Liberty University, I used Federal Tuition Assistance, which was extremely beneficial but did not cover the total costs of the courses; the remainder of the fees and the cost of books were paid out-of-pocket.

Through the Fort Bragg education office, I found out about the North Carolina Legislative Tuition Assistance Grant¹, which provided enough assistance to cover the difference between a service member's tuition and the amount provided by Federal

Tuition Assistance. I completed an associate of arts in liberal arts degree with no personal cost, except for books, which Campbell rented to military students at a small fee. The classes were offered on-post, after regular duty hours; I was able to take two courses a semester, plus summer courses. I rarely had conflicts with any of the professors over scheduling, provided I completed my assignments in a timely fashion.

After my active service was complete, I wanted to finish my Bachelor of Arts degree and was accepted at one of New Jersey's state universities. After my Exit Time of Service (ETS), I had enlisted in the Army Reserve, with no additional education benefit beyond the \$14,400.00 I was receiving in monthly increments from the Veteran's Administration. While working through my first semester, I found out that the tuition for students who are members of the New Jersey Army and Air National Guard is waived at any state university or county college.² This is a state program, memorialized in the New Jersey Statutes; other states have similar programs available. The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States publishes an annual almanac, which lists education opportunities by state. The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of New Jersey also offers some scholarships for Service Members and their dependents.³

Post-Service Options

There are options for education and funding available to the service member after their ETS or retirement. For the service member interested in teaching, there are the Troops to Teachers program; this program, which operates as a part of DAN TES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support)⁴, assists a service member with obtaining certification as an educator. There are also stipends available for those

service members who take teaching positions in a challenged district through the Troops-To-Teachers Program.⁵ DANTES will also reimburse a service member for the cost of certain tests taken while serving; I am currently in the process of applying for reimbursement of the cost of taking the Praxis II exam, which was necessary in order to obtain my certificate of eligibility to teach English and Social Studies.

Nontraditional Courses, Nontraditional Avenues

Many of these benefits apply to professional certifications as well; a service member is not necessarily limited to an attendance of a degree granting program. For example, I obtained my certification as an Emergency Medical Technician at a New Jersey community college using the New Jersey National Guard Tuition waiver. A service member can also find less expensive educational opportunities at universities that have established partnerships with community colleges. These relationships are common in New Jersey; for example, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, has an agreement with Brookdale Community College, the County College of Monmouth, where a student can complete their associates at Brookdale and immediately transfer to Rutgers with most if not all of their credits. Another New Jersey University, Kean, has a campus built immediately adjacent to Ocean County College; students can complete their associate degree and move up the hill to a course of study at Kean.

The Army Education System and Civilian Education

In the course of my career, I have hit a few roadblocks, but that didn't keep me from continuing my education. For example, I noted above that, in the nineties, I was stationed at Fort Bragg. Even back then, the operational tempo at Bragg was high, and it was nothing compared to what it is now. I overcame this particular problem by

specifically seeking out military-friendly schools that had flexible programs. I was able to schedule my classes around field problems and my regular duty day.

In the modern era of online and hybrid courses, it's become easier to schedule classes in such a way that they don't interfere with the accomplishment of assigned tasks. However, the ease of access has led to the rise of for-profit institutions of higher learning. It is important for Soldiers to consider the type of school they might want to attend; for-profit institutions can be significantly more expensive than state schools. Education benefits are finite and should be treated as such.

In the interest of saving money, a Soldier may also access their Joint Services Transcript. While not all military courses are worth college credit, many schools will award elective credits for physical education and outdoorsmanship based on a Soldier's attendance of basic training.⁶ Some schools with Reserve Officer Training Corps departments will waive the first - and sometimes even the second - years of classes for those who have attended Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training.

Conclusion

Since I joined the Army, I've continued to hear that a college education is not necessary for noncommissioned officers. Though college credits contribute to a service member's promotion potential, a degree does not immediately qualify a service member to be a successful squad leader, team leader, or platoon sergeant. However, I enlisted some time ago, and the number of educational resources available to Soldiers makes completion of a degree program, regardless of operational tempo, an achievable goal that can benefit a service member during and after their initial enlistment.

References

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