

# **Educational Shifts within the United States Army**

## **Changing the Perception of Education at the Unit Level**

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The United States Army is on the doorstep of many significant changes as we transform from a large force, operating at a high tempo, to a smaller force that is prepared to fight on the battlefields of tomorrow; a critical aspect to how we make this transition will find its roots in education. The debate between civilian versus military educational systems should instead seek answers on how we can best integrate these systems as a two-pronged approach to learning. Leaders at all levels must overcome challenges in funding, time and mission requirements to set all of their subordinates on a path that will ensure their success as well as those around them. According to government data , only six percent of our enlisted force has completed a bachelor's degree. By fiscal year 2025 the Army should strive to have a rate much closer to the national average of thirty four percent.

While most believe that a post-secondary education is a critical component to long-term success both in the military and in the civilian world, views differ significantly on which route is best to obtain this education and how it would be best put to use. As members of the military, we find ourselves in a unique position to obtain, at no cost to us, civilian education that will ensure our competitiveness both in and out of uniform. Far too many of the Soldiers in our ranks fail to take advantage of the benefits afforded to them. The responsibility for this failure starts and ends with the Non-Commissioned Officer Corps.

One needs to look no further than the NCO Creed to find the importance of "remaining tactically and technically proficient." We, as Soldiers, are also reminded of the importance of education when it comes time to review our own, or rate a subordinate Soldier's duty performance. Over the course of the last fifteen years, a demanding operational tempo has shifted focus away from traditional education as our force required low-density MOS training to ensure battlefield success in the multiple areas of operation, around the globe, that the United States Army has found itself in. As our Army transitions yet again, leaders must make education a priority.

The diversity that is found in the United States Army is an important part of who we are as an

organization. With Service Members from every walk of life, it is important to make mention that not each one is perfectly suited for the rigors involved with obtaining a bachelor's degree. Recognizing long-term goals as well as strengths, weaknesses and areas of interest should be the responsibility of every First Line Leader. How can we ask a First Line Leader to develop an education plan, when he or she holds little value in education? Regardless of academic aptitude, a variety of educational opportunities exist for us to take advantage of. It is our responsibility to make subordinates aware of these opportunities.

Many Soldiers enter active military service as an alternative to the traditional educational path of entering college immediately upon graduating from high school. It takes these Service Members very little time to get out of a proper education-focused mindset. By the time these Soldiers are in the NCOES pipeline, their academic ability has diminished to a level that is not compatible with the higher education standards of their peers in the civilian sector. By the time these Soldiers approach their ETS, the likelihood that they will continue with education after separation is very low. In fact, a Pew Research study concluded that veterans without a college degree are statistically more likely to encounter difficulties when they transition. This cycle must be broken early in their military career. As fiscal resources continue to be scarce, the downsizing of the military is sure to catch many soon-to-be separated Soldiers, without the skillsets necessary to flourish in the civilian world.

Many career Soldiers elect to delay starting their education until the later portion of their careers. Civilian education is too often viewed as a tool to transition to the civilian world rather than a potential force-multiplier within the Army. When Soldiers do not place a priority on furthering their education while still wearing the uniform, the Army is losing out on having these educated soldiers in their ranks.

In 2015, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the national unemployment rate for those with a bachelor's degree at almost 2.8 percent. Those whose education consists of only a high school diploma average 5.4 percent. Likewise, the difference in earning power is significant; the median weekly wage jumps from \$678 to \$1137 as a result of obtaining a four year degree. Over a lifetime of working, this difference is staggering. Civilians have the unfortunate necessity of analyzing the cost versus benefit for obtaining a degree. As members of the military, our only cost is our time. Soldiers are their own worst enemies when it comes time to elect to make that sacrifice.

With the standard retirement age in the United States currently at sixty five, most working adults will spend forty five years in the workforce. Even if a Service Member spends a full twenty year career in uniform, it is likely that a second career will be needed to sustain a livable wage that will provide a more comfortable lifestyle. The fact that the unemployment rate for veterans in 2015 stood at 5.8 percent speaks to the need for educational reform within the

military. Focusing on civilian education during a Soldier's military career will result in more post-military career opportunities and a much higher overall earning potential.

Professional Military Education has undergone significant changes in recent years. Leaders, at all levels, recognize the importance of continuing to develop our internal education systems. Early in FM 6-22, the premise behind leader development is addressed. "Leader development is achieved through the life-long synthesis of the knowledge, skills, and experiences gained through the training and education opportunities in the institutional, operational, and self-development domains." The force needs to take a much more serious look at this concept and diligently develop a plan that encompasses this theory.

In the fall of 2015, the Army took significant steps to overhaul the Professional Military Education System, otherwise known as PME. The changes that were implemented are exactly what the PME needs to legitimize itself with academic institutions that cater to military members. Class rankings, GPA, and a renewed focus on writing will show all Soldiers that the Army does place an importance on furthering one's education, and it also has high expectations of its Soldiers' academic performance that are in line with the historical standards of the larger institution. Additionally, these changes will also help prepare junior Enlisted Members for the civilian academic arena.

The Select, Train, Educate, and Promote (STEP) program sends a very clear message to everyone that education will no longer take a back seat when it comes to promotion and career development. As of February, 2016, fourteen thousand Soldiers throughout the Army had yet to complete their required NCOES to be eligible for promotion. According to CSM David Davenport, the Senior Enlisted Soldier for TRADOC, many of these Soldiers simply are not ready to attend these schools. He goes on to say that unit level leaders must do more to prepare soldiers for the challenges that they will face when they arrive at training .

One way to reduce the backlog at PME courses is to waive some requirements for those Service Members who have already obtained a bachelor's degree. The Army could still utilize STEP, but should allow promotion for those who have civilian education credentials. A twenty four month waiver process would allow these Soldiers ample time to complete the requirements of the Professional Military Education System. These Service Members would also stand greater odds of success because they are familiar with types of challenges that will be encountered in their upcoming NCOES course.

Furthermore, the Army could institute civilian educational requirements for Enlisted Soldiers. By requiring all leaders with a pay grade of E-8 and above to have a bachelor's degree, the Army would align itself more closely with the educational requirements of the civilian world. It would be realistic to ascertain that the quality of leadership would improve by these senior leaders developing themselves by furthering their education outside of military doctrine

developing themselves by furthering their education outside of military academies.

The best way for NCO's to drive change in how education is viewed is to start at the lowest level. First Line Leaders should, during the Soldier's initial counseling upon arrival at their new unit, articulate the expectation that furthering one's education, in one way or another, is a requirement of the organization. Leaders should be tasked with helping a soldier to develop and implement an education plan. Quarterly counseling should follow and progress will be closely monitored. Leaders should also be evaluated on how their subordinates perform academically and on the progress that they make throughout the rating period.

The gap between civilian education and PME can best be bridged with an overhaul to how the American Council on Education assigns credit recommendations on the Joint Services Transcript, or JST. Army leadership should continue to work with this organization to diversify the category of credits, thus making them more transferable to common degree programs. This will encourage Soldiers to have their JST evaluated by local schools and take steps towards pursuing their degree. A recent Rand Corporation study suggests that only fifty seven percent of Service Members attempt to transfer credits earned in the military to outside academic institutions. Forty seven percent of those that did, were not satisfied with the number of credits that were awarded.

The Army should also encourage education by offering an Army War College style education to Enlisted Members who have a desire to pursue a graduate degree. This can be used in conjunction with the current STEP system for NCOES. Other lessons learned from the Officer Corps can be utilized to encourage education amongst Enlisted Soldiers. It is common for Senior Officers to require reading, discussion and report writing for subordinate Officers. NCO's should incorporate this style of learning via Company-level NCODP.

A common theme exists with Enlisted Soldiers who fail to take advantage of educational opportunities. Typically, these Soldiers cite the lack of free time to complete college level studies. This obstacle can be tackled at the lowest level of Army leadership. A top-down approach to encouraging education starts with allowing Soldiers who are pursuing a certain credit threshold to be relieved of some additional duties which are counterproductive to their studies. If an increased focus on academics can be achieved without compromising military objectives, it is the responsibility of the leadership to encourage its Soldiers to develop themselves by furthering their education.

The GoArmyEd Portal, which Soldiers at all levels utilize to request tuition assistance and track degree progress is in desperate need of an over-haul. The system is antiquated and very cumbersome to use. The customer support staff has difficulty assisting in even the most basic functions, as the approval process for courses is typically done at the state or installation level. Upgrading this system will show the force that the Army is serious about making enrollment as

easy as possible.

easy as possible.

When debating the merits of civilian versus military education, it is important to recognize the different purposes behind each form of education. Military education largely exists to meet current operational requirements of the force. Recent changes in PME have done a fantastic job in fostering a climate of educational excellence. Continued development and monitoring of the PME changes will be required to ensure that Service Members are benefiting from this exposure to education.

When Service Members rely solely on the PME system to fulfill their educational needs, they risk not being properly prepared for reintegration into the civilian job market. No matter how long an individual Soldier serves within the ranks of the Army, civilian education will set the stage for increased earning power and a higher standard of living throughout one's life. At every level of leadership within the Army's ranks, lies the responsibility to assist subordinates with developing and implementing an educational plan that will ensure long-term success. By changing the mentality on how education is viewed, the Army can make the two-pronged approach to education a reality and will be better prepared to accomplish the mission and provide for the welfare of all Soldiers.

## Endnotes

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**Staff Sgt. Wahl** is a Recruiting and Retention NCO with the MN ARNG Recruiting and Retention Battalion. He has been assigned as a production recruiter for the past 7 years. Wahl previously deployed to Taji, Iraq in 2004 and Kosovo in 2007-2008. He is currently a student at the University of Minnesota, where he is studying corporate tax accounting with a projected graduation date of May 2018. His life-long passion for learning spawned an interest in Soldier development as it relates to education. Many soon-to-be separated Soldiers are not prepared academically for reintegration into the civilian world. This paper aims to raise awareness, at the unit level, about educational opportunities for Soldiers.