

Self-Development Through Tuition Assistance



(Photo Courtesy Stripes.com)

The tuition assistance program helps Soldiers pay for college while in the military. Attending classes and using tuition assistance seems simple, but time and culture can get in the way. Leaders in some career fields or specific assignments state that they don't have time to allow Soldiers to attend college. The result can be that after Soldiers complete their 2, 3, or 4-year commitment, and leave the military less prepared due to a lack of credentials and knowledge. For the Army, if the Soldier does not find employment immediately after exiting the military, there is an expense in unemployment benefits incurred by the Army. One way to benefit the Army is to invest in our Soldier by advocating for self-development using the tuition assistance program.

The problem of not investing in our subordinates by providing them time is that we invest money in programs such as tuition assistance whether it is used or not. "The Army spends \$275-\$300 million on Tuition Assistance (TA) annually" (Hartman, 2015). The salary of counselors, upkeep of websites and infrastructure, and even brick-and-mortar facilities cost money whether Soldiers use tuition assistance or not. Of course, when Soldiers don't take advantage of these types of programs the Army pays again in unemployment benefits.

The unemployment benefits for separating Soldiers costs the Army millions. In fact, 2016 ended with the lowest unemployment costs paid by the US Army in 13 years. It was the first year the costs were less than \$200 million in over a decade and a significant reduction from the peak of

\$515 million in 2011. The 2016 cost was \$178.2 million (Army Human Resources Command, 2016). Consider what an Army division could accomplish towards readiness with \$200 million. The money the Army spends to pay for unemployment might be reduced by increasing the education and credentialing of our enlisted population.

Of course, the educating of Soldiers and veterans is nothing new; at the end of World War II, many Soldiers leaving the military chose to utilize the GI Bill of the day. They discovered the monetary benefit of attending higher education by utilizing the GI Bill. Increasing their income by over 40% in the late 1940s helped veterans, while providing a return on investment to the United States at a rate of “two to eight times as much in income taxes as it paid out in educational benefits” (Anderson & Kime, 1996, p. 4). This income increase assisted the veterans through improved quality of life, changed the country by creating the middle class, and affected adult education by increasing enrollment, research, and revenue (Anderson & Kime, 1996; Olson, 1973). The fact that these benefits allowed for both vocational and technical education, in addition to colleges and universities, provided the country with the motivation to increase its research in engineering and mechanical technologies (Gottron, 1991, p. 10). Today’s investment in our personnel may result in as many benefits for the Army and American society with the right approach.

While the military utilizes training inside and outside the classroom, attending traditional colleges and technical schools that correlate with military duties, build on and validate experiences and skills gained by service members. In addition to that, Soldiers gain knowledge and experience along the way. This prepares them for the future in the military, as well as civilian life afterwards. While it sounds simple, many leaders promote the idea of pursuing self-development through college, universities, or technical schools, but find little time to take action on their words. Some see the solution as simply having stakeholders “recognize the value of continuing education and training and to build them into the culture of work” (Gottron, 1991, p. 15). However, culture can get in the way.

Consider the number of your Soldiers that are taking advantage of the tuition assistance program. How does the unit climate/culture influence those numbers? The development of subordinates can be related to many efforts, let’s focus on two things, readiness and the Soldier for Life (SFL) program. How do we tie an educated workforce to readiness, it’s through personnel development. Consider ADRP 7-0 and the three domains of the Army leader development model; the institutional, operational, and self-development domains ensure the professional growth of our Army leaders. Developing our Army leaders requires a broad range of experiences; tuition assistance helps to increase those opportunities. Retired Army General David H. Petraeus in the article *Beyond the Cloister*, advocates education by saying “The most powerful tool any soldier carries is not his weapon but his mind. These days, and for the days ahead as far as we can see, what soldiers at all ranks know is liable to be at least as important to their success as what they can physically do” (Petraeus, 2007). The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is another advocate of educating the force. General Dunford testified before Congress in 2014 stating, “Encouraging well-qualified Marines to utilize resources to better themselves via education and training is part of the Marine Corps ethos... This leads to better Marines and in turn better citizens” (Schehl, 2015). When it comes to self-development, education outside organizational and professional military experiences helps to balance leader growth.

In relation to the SFL program, using tuition assistance can complement that program as well. By encouraging our Soldiers to seek out postsecondary education, we in the Army benefit from their development while they are still serving. However, this development using tuition assistance may also reduce the Army's unemployment costs. Since "SFL also works to curb the cost of high unemployment" (Under Secretary of Defense Chief Financial Officer, 2015), these programs are mutually supporting the same efforts. Ultimately, the use of tuition assistance may benefit the Army with a better Soldier, and America may have a better citizen.

By being an advocate for self-development above what we gain in the military, we are encouraging Soldiers to expand their view of the world through education. Why wait until Soldiers leave the military to invest in their civilian education? We want them to learn and grow in our organizations so the Army might benefit from what they learn, their methods of thinking and reacting, and from a more educated force.

Now let's get back to the unemployment costs. Educating our force by using the tuition assistance program provides Soldiers with increased opportunities as they exit the military. These increased opportunities transition to employability and therefore may reduce the Army's annual costs of paying unemployment benefits. If we can generate the culture throughout the Army today of pursuing an education early, and combining that with a culture of seeking out developmental opportunities and training, we can develop Soldiers that are much more capable and competent.

But let's not forget the Soldier for Life program, this creation of a more educated workforce is also taking care Soldiers. The long-term benefits they receive from their education gained while in the military will carry them into their civilian careers as they separate. As an additional benefit, it's possible this approach towards development will reduce the cost of recruiting new Soldiers. As a possible career for young people, the Army must compete with others when recruiting. The Army becomes more attractive if more Soldiers exit the military entering the civilian workforce at higher rates of pay, increased certifications, and with more opportunities. This attraction might draw increased desire for young people to join the military to capitalize on the same opportunities while serving their country.

So why is this important? Focusing on the investment of Soldiers may cost a few hundred million dollars annually, but produce increased knowledge, credentialing, and opportunities for Soldier. The other options, unemployment expenses provide no long-term benefits to the Army, or the Soldiers. The Army invests significant time, money, and effort in leader development programs. The tuition assistance program is just one of the ways we can develop our Soldiers and leaders, support the SFL program, and maybe save the Army a few dollars along the way. As you look to your formations in the future, consider your Soldiers educating themselves not as time away from the unit, but as an investment in the future of the Army.

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SGM Scot D. Cates

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