

Marching Forward With NCOPDS

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Command Sgt. Maj. David S. Davenport Sr., U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, listens to a question from a Soldier during a town hall meeting Nov. 30, 2016 at the Staff Sgt. Todd R. Cornell Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. (U.S. Army photo by Scott T. Sturkol)

Providing a climate of steady personal and professional growth within the noncommissioned officer corps is a vital component of nurturing strong leaders and maintaining overall readiness.

As the Army's mission evolves in response to continuing challenges, so too must the methods employed to train and promote the current and future generations of Soldiers. The driving force to meet this essential need is the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System, which represents an extensive overhaul in methodology and attitude directed at improving Professional Military Education.

"NCOPDS was established to operationalize the concepts and lines of effort outlined in the NCO 2020 Strategy (<http://www.tradoc.army.mil/FrontPageContent/Docs/NCO2020.pdf>). The system is designed to develop NCO competencies for the 21st century and to support greater flexibility with regard to when, where, and how Soldiers learn," said Command Sgt. Maj. David S. Davenport, Sr., U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, in his "CSM's Blog (<http://tradocnews.org/category/straight-from-the-csm/>)" feature for the TRADOC website.¹

The lines of effort to which Davenport refers (development, talent management, and stewardship of the profession) define the comprehensive leader development philosophy at the heart of the NCO 2020 Strategy:

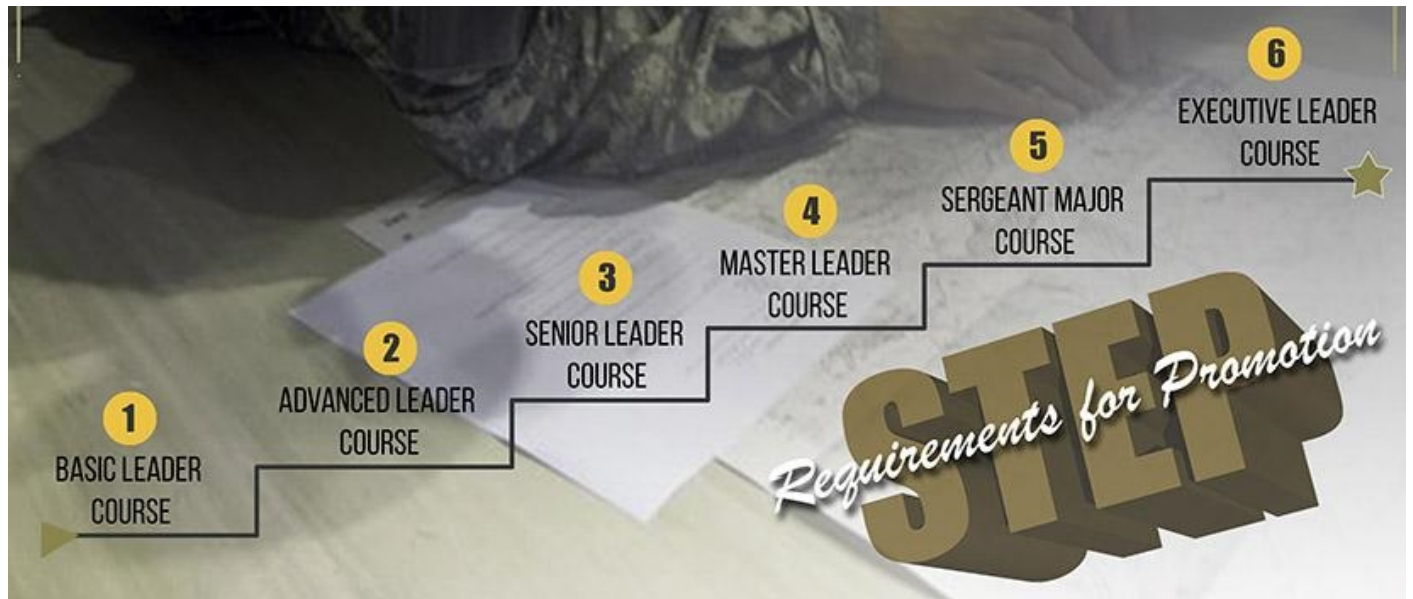
Development. NCOs develop as leaders over time through deliberate progressive and sequential processes incorporating training, education, and experience across the three learning domains throughout the Soldier Lifecycle.

Talent Management. The purposeful expansion of an NCO's core military occupational specialty proficiency and leadership provided through developmental positions, opportunities, and assignments both within and outside of their career management field.

Stewardship of the Profession. Strengthen the NCO corps by emphasizing the role of the NCO in building and sustaining trust, constantly improving military expertise, setting an example of honorable service, fostering a climate rich in esprit de corps, and serving as stewards of the Army profession.²

Education Is Key

NCOPDS is not simply a replacement for the NCO Education System. Instead, it retains many aspects of NCOES with proven effectiveness in the technical, tactical, and self-improvement learning arenas.³ Added to the mix is a greater emphasis on opportunities to gain experience from different assignments as well as a focus on education. This latter component anchors the STEP strategy—Select, Train, Educate, Promote—that came online in January 2016.



STEP Provides Noncommissioned Officers a roadmap to promotion (<http://tradocnews.org/step-provides-noncommissioned-officers-roadmap-to-promotion/>)." (graphic courtesy of TRADOC)

As Davenport put it, "If you want to get promoted, you've got to get to school."⁴ The objective of this enhanced attention to education is providing appropriate career development at each rank within the NCO corps. In addition to cultivating an environment of perpetual learning, this connection between NCOPDS and the promotion process will recognize Soldiers best suited for advancement and, ultimately, qualified for retention.⁵ NCOs already must demonstrate technical and tactical proficiency in their assigned role and complete the appropriate structured self-development courses in order to be considered for promotion. Now, selectees for the grades of sergeant through sergeant major must also attend the resident course commensurate with their new rank, before pinning on that new rank.

Prospective sergeants will attend the Basic Leader Course. The Advanced Leader Course and Senior Leader Course remain unchanged for Soldiers selected, respectively, for staff sergeant and sergeant first class. Selectees for master sergeant now have the Master Leader Course, which is specifically developed for NCOs who have reached this career milestone. After completing the Sergeants Major Course, those sergeants major and command sergeants major who are staffed to general officers are required to attend the Executive Leader Course.⁶

Feedback Inspires Change

Hearing from those most impacted by these new initiatives is perhaps the primary motivator of this evolution from NCOES to NCOPDS. For the past several years, respondents to the Center for Army Leadership (<http://usacac.army.mil/organizations/mccoe/cal>)'s "Annual Survey of Army Leadership" have indicated a general dissatisfaction with the direction of NCO professional military education programs. Areas of concern include a perceived prioritizing of technical training over leadership skills, and that regular updates are needed to keep SSD and resident course curricula relevant as preparation tools for Soldiers.⁷

"Our studies and feedback from leaders and units identified six Leader Core Competencies, or LCCs, that all NCOs should develop while in PME," Davenport wrote in his blog. "Readiness, leadership, training management, Army and Joint Operations, program management and communications. These LCCs support the NCO 2020 Strategy and the Army Leader Development Strategy."⁸

Learning and applying these core competencies are now required of NCOs across all occupational fields. Along with being a key component of each of the rank-appropriate resident courses, attention to the LCCs will factor prominently in the new Distributed Leader Course. DLC is a complete renovation of the Structured Self-Development Program, which for decades has served as the cornerstone of distance learning for Soldiers.

Beginning in 2018, DLC will bring an updated, modern approach to the self-study platform. DLC emphasizes a "building blocks" approach to

PME, with courses designed to grow in depth and complexity along with the individual Soldier's advancement in rank, as well as having a distinct link to his or her role and responsibilities.⁹

"The content will be streamlined and rigorous, but relevant and progressive to your development," Davenport offered in another of his frequent and informative blog updates. "I approved the redesigned lesson plan outlines and look forward to the final product."¹⁰

A major aspect of the revamped program is its employment of interactive computer-based scenarios, which require students to make decisions based on lessons they learn by progressing through the training topic. The new courses are similar to modern video gaming presentation, providing students with relevant information as they proceed through a scenario or other exercise. Responses to decision points or "gates" are scored, and points are awarded or deducted from a student's overall total as he or she works toward successful course completion.¹¹

"Every decision that a Soldier makes, in terms of DLC, is graded and evaluated," said Command Sgt. Maj. Jimmy Sellers, commandant of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (<http://usasma.armylive.dodlive.mil/>). "If they make a decision based off the mission statement to do one thing, it can cost them some points in terms of their overall grade."¹²

Additionally, DLC moves away from testing that relies on multiple-choice questions in favor of assessments that require students to submit responses in essay form. This new method will drive students to better absorb and understand course content as they progress through training exercises, which will result in a higher rate of successful course completion.¹³

Present Needs, Future Rewards

The primary goal of these education programs is to develop and improve an NCO's professional knowledge and experiences, allowing them to fulfill their responsibilities and become effective leaders. However, PME also carries with it tangible benefits which can assist Soldiers with their transition to civilian life.

"We're one of the largest academic institutions in America," said Sergeant Major of the Army Daniel A. Dailey in September 2015, while discussing the Army's PME system. "We train and educate more people than any other organization in the United States. We have the capacity to be a university. The question is, why aren't we doing it?"¹⁴

The answer to the SMA's question is the Army University, which has been organized into a system that mirrors many aspects of civilian institutions of higher learning, and with an aim toward maximizing the educational opportunities afforded to every Soldier.¹⁵

One of Army University's main initiatives is documenting Soldier training throughout their military career. This includes providing credentialing opportunities across all occupational specialties, which can also lead to civilian certifications and licenses. The goal is to produce a record that outlines not just a list of completed training courses, but also statistics of a Soldier's education and job experience. This will be beneficial when pursuing civilian education or certification, or as proof individual skills and accomplishments to potential civilian employers.¹⁶

Dailey sees it as a logical extension and ultimate endgame for the investment to educate Soldiers over the course of their careers.

"We spend taxpayer dollars on training and educating our young men and women, of which a majority can be used in the civilian world for finding jobs or the equivalent academic credits," said Dailey.¹⁷

Conclusion

Improving NCO professional education is an essential ingredient in the recipe for successfully transforming every Soldier into an "innovative, competent enlisted leader grounded in heritage, values, and tradition that embodies the Warrior Ethos."¹⁸ NCOPDS is a dynamic toolbox that will strengthen the NCO corps, providing a means for every Soldier to advance their individual proficiency and long term career goals. In turn, this will improve unit preparedness as the Army marches forward and addresses current needs while readying itself for future conflicts.

Soldiers interested in following Command Sgt. Maj. Davenport's regular updates about NCOPDS and PME are encouraged to bookmark his blog at the TRADOC website: <http://tradocnews.org/category/straight-from-the-csm/> (<http://tradocnews.org/category/straight-from-the-csm/>).

Notes

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 13. Kevin Fleming, "Academy Commandant: 'We Are Adapting NCO Development,'" TRADOC News Center website, March 24, 2016, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://tradocnews.org/academy-commandant-we-are-adapting-nco-development/> (<http://tradocnews.org/academy-commandant-we-are-adapting-nco-development/>).
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