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Senior NCOs answer questions about changes to NCO professional development

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During a dress rehearsal for TRADOC's State of NCO Development Town Hall 4, some of the participants talked about how the town hall would be run, while cameramen tested their settings.

No matter how long or how honorably they serve in the U.S. Army, Soldiers often have a difficult time translating their skills to a civilian mindset and finding a good civilian job when they leave the Army.

Imagine if the Army education each Soldier receives — starting with the Basic Leader Course and ending with the Sergeants Major Course — leads not just to a better military career, but degrees that can impress those hiring in the private workforce.

It's a future that was laid out to NCOs during Training and Doctrine Command's State of NCO Development Town Hall 4. The March 30 town hall focused on stewardship of the Army profession and featured senior enlisted leaders coming together at Fort Eustis, Virginia, to discuss and answer questions from NCOs about NCO professional development.¹

asked about the possibility of earning a bachelor's degree based on completing the Sergeants Major Course, Charles Guyette, director of training at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, provided the vision of NCO civilian education.²

"I think the first thing to note is that what we're doing with NCO Professional Military Education, especially at the Sergeants Major Course, is to make the best sergeant major that we can produce for the Army and bring that down all the way to the best sergeant in BLC," Guyette said. "So the Sergeants Major Course is going through Army University and the Command and General Staff College to take our curriculum as it now looks to the Higher Learning Commission and gain academic hours to apply to a degree called Leadership and Workforce Management. There is some work behind that. It's going to take a couple of years. And we are doing other things like developing competency-based examinations that we will apply to each level of NCOPME. So as a Soldier moves through that continuum, they'll get an associate's degree at a certain point, then a bachelor's, then ultimately a master's degree at the Sergeants Major Course."

Importance to junior NCOs

Guyette noted that these changes would not be grandfathered, so current members of the Sergeants Major Course will not be receiving a civilian degree. The town hall's moderator,

Master Sgt. Mike Lavigne, emphasized that the changes will more strongly affect new Soldiers and junior NCOs.

“Yes, absolutely,” Guyette said. “Because what we are doing is restructuring the content in BLC, Advanced Leader Course and Senior Leader Course, there will be building blocks throughout the whole continuum so that we will be able to get credits through the examinations and get it all transcribed. Ultimately, with the course accredited, if you don’t go after that (Leadership and Workforce Management) degree, all the accumulation of education will be transcribed, and you can apply it to another degree.”

Guyette reiterated that the changes to the NCO Professional Development System would help build better Soldiers.³

“What we’re doing with the curriculum is we’re revolutionizing the content,” Guyette said. “We’re revolutionizing the delivery. We’re changing the mentality of the facilitators on how to deliver the content. We’re increasing the rigor of not only the curriculum but the assessments. It’s a byproduct. Getting the education, and getting more out of it in the continuum, is just going to put that much more into the Soldiers’ rucksacks.”

NCOs in the town hall’s online forums commented that, despite the efforts of STEP (Select, Train, Educate and Promote), too many leaders are telling Soldiers to defer their seat at ALC or SLC because of a schedule conflict with a unit gunnery or field training. Army leaders need to increase their efforts to mitigate such problems, said Command Sgt. Maj. Scott Schroeder, the command sergeant major of U.S. Army Forces Command.⁴

“There is no doubt that there are Soldiers in our formation right now who are being disadvantaged from promotion because we are not sending them to school when they are scheduled for school, whether it’s during a gunnery or a deployment,” Schroeder said. “We all have to own this. STEP is a step in the right direction, but it still hasn’t prevented sergeants from performing duties as a staff sergeant, and it hasn’t prevented specialists from performing duties as a sergeant and so on. The purpose of NCOPDS is to prepare you for your next duty position.

We don't allow individuals to perform duties as a jump master if they haven't been to the jump master course."

TRADOC is working on institutional fixes to help solve the problem, said Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport, command sergeant major of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. In some low-density military occupational specialties, there may be only two SLCs each year, for instance. TRADOC is looking at ways to spread those seat slots over four courses instead of two so that there are more scheduling opportunities for Soldiers.⁵

"First of all, deferments are always going to happen," Davenport said. "We're realists and understand that we will have deferments. Because we have that understanding, when we developed the deferment policy, we wanted to go to the first general officer in the chain of command to ask, 'Is that NCO really needed at the event to make the unit successful?' If they are, then the memo needs to say when that NCO can go to school. That is why we have the deferment policy that we do."

Ultimately, it comes down to the Soldier being ready for school, Davenport said.⁶

"We are still having problems with Soldiers — we go through all this to get them into the school seat — and they show up not ready to train," Davenport said. "Whether it's height/weight, APFT, or not committed to our profession. Help me to utilize our capacity to its fullest by making sure the Soldier is ready to go."

Reserve and National Guard

The changes brought about through STEP and the One Army school system, which is the integration of Army component school systems, have been a great help to U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers, said Command Sgt. Maj. Nagee Lunde of the U.S. Army Reserve. The U.S. Army Reserve is using 97 percent of its training seats, an unprecedented number.⁷

"It all comes down to the process that has been put in place for the utilization of training seats, getting folks into seats and forecasting far enough in advance," Lunde said. "The STEP

process has really worked for the Army Reserve. We have seen a dramatic decrease in the Army Reserve's backlog of folks going to school."

Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Shannon, National Guard training force integrator, agreed that changes have made it easier for National Guard Soldiers to get through their required education.⁸

"In relation to the process of getting Soldiers to school, it has gotten easier with the One Army school system," Shannon said. "With the One Army school system, the time that our Soldiers spend in school is a definite benefit in relation to a short-term phase course. Or if they can go, for example, to a Basic Leader Course, complete that school in 22 days, and then return to their unit, in relation to the active-component school where maybe it's a little longer, but the same [program of instruction]. CSM Davenport is taking a look at what the training days are and how many training days will be in the Army's training week. That is definitely a plus for the Army National Guard."

It is important for the Army to continue to build up and focus on the One Army school system, Schroeder said.⁹

"If any of you were in the Army before Sept. 11, 2001, we acted like three separate armies," Schroeder said. "We have One Army now, and it consists of three components. Our school system needs to be reflective of that. This will help keep us tied together. The great thing is the [regional training institutes] and our Reserve component noncommissioned officer academies deliver the same curriculum that our active component schools deliver. The difference is the way the Reserve component delivers the training. They work on the weekends and have extended training days. The active component can tie into Reserve component courses, but it's very hard for the Reserve component to take advantage of the active component classes because of the time we take to deliver the same training. We may need to think about, in the active component, spreading out our training days and working over the weekend."

The efforts to improve NCO professional development all lead to the same outcome: Building better Soldiers, while simultaneously improving their prospects in the civilian workforce.¹⁰

“We are working hard to get our Soldiers more marketable, so they can slide into jobs, evident by the work we’re doing with credentialing,” Davenport said. “Army University is leading that effort into making sure that our Soldiers’ military skills translate into some civilian accreditation or a credential that helps them become whatever they choose to be when they transition from the Army.”

References

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