

Success with Writing Software Is Only Latest Example of Innovation at Fort Hood NCOA

By Clifford Kyle Jones - NCO Journal

May 11, 2016



Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph McFarlane, the III Corps NCO Academy commandant, and Sgt. 1st Class Amber DeArmond, a senior group leader at the academy. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

The III Corps NCO Academy at Fort Hood was selected to pilot the Criterion writing assessment program last year, but that is just one of the ways the academy has adjusted its curriculum to better serve its junior NCOs.

Fort Hood's NCO Academy is housed in the same complex as the post's education center, so for years the commandant and deputy commandant have used the center's counselors and other resources to encourage Soldiers to pursue an education and even to retake the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to boost the general technical, or GT, portion of the ASVAB.

"You have to try to bring all those resources together, to where the students have every

opportunity to use it,” said Sgt. Maj. Salvador Montez Jr., the NCOA’s deputy commandant. “If you can have an NCOA close to that post’s education center, that’s money. And we’re right next door. Even those test administrators come over here and give us tests during our training. It’s not part of our curriculum, but we’re trying to raise GT scores on these Soldiers, too, because that’s what’s required for them to be drill sergeants, recruiters, etc. You need a certain GT score.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph McFarlane, the NCOA’s commandant, said incorporating a GT Predictor exam into the Basic Leader Course has led to an increased ASVAB score for 7 to 10 percent of BLC graduates.

“That’s one more drill sergeant, one more Ranger instructor, one more master gunner — the higher technical positions” that require higher GT scores, McFarlane said.

And although McFarlane says 7 to 10 percent may not sound like much, the Fort Hood NCOA has 220 to 300 students in each BLC and is conducting the 22-day courses almost back to back throughout the year. That percentage translates to improved scores for hundreds of Soldiers each year.

“I think that was the first reason we got tagged with [the Criterion pilot] last year — because we already had the GT Predictor incorporated into BLC here,” Montez said.

The GT Predictor program demonstrates the NCO Academy cadre’s commitment to success.

“I’ve surrendered a lot of my commandant’s time to the other things that are beneficial, just to help the students out, as well as to try to make the curriculum better without changing the curriculum,” McFarlane said of the 15 hours of BLC instruction that falls under his discretion as commandant. “I sacrifice my commandant’s time for something else that’s within the guidelines.”

Montez says the NCOA’s success is directly attributable to McFarlane.

“The commandant has to allow the flexibility and to be open enough to say, ‘Hey, this is good for the Soldiers, this is a great program. How can we make it better? What can we do?’ ” he said. “If you don’t have that type of structure in an academy to allow the NCOES system to improve, it’s just going to stay stagnant.”

The Fort Hood academy is in regular contact with the Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development, as well as the Army’s other NCO academies. This was true before the Criterion program launched, but that communication has only increased since the writing program was rolled out across the Army.

“We try to keep all academies informed, ...” Montez said. “Every time we get an update,

every time we get an analysis, it gets loaded where everyone can see it up to NCOPOD. They usually provide a little error analysis, and this tells you how your academy scored and executed it.”

Other academies have struggled to set up the program and get BLC students to take the assessment. Montez points to a spreadsheet that shows the number of students who took the assessment at each academy.

“There are a lot of zeroes there, because there were only 14 [NCO academies] that were able to successfully get in there,” he said.

McFarlane said, “There’s a lot of communication on Blackboard between the academies that are brand new [to Criterion] ... to my cadre and myself. They haven’t seen it before. We’ve been lucky because we piloted it first, and we had the opportunity to train a bunch of cadre before it was even sent to be piloted.”

The Fort Hood NCOA cadre had challenges at the inception of the program, as well, but they have worked diligently to implement the program effectively.

“We’re always trying to improve stuff,” Montez said. “We’re always looking at making it better, and what can we do. Even the automation systems we use are the latest, and we’re eventually going to go to tablets. That’s where we want to be. We’re not there yet, but we’re pretty close.

“And I’m hoping everyone else will ask, ‘Hey, what’s Fort Hood doing?’ ” he said. “We have some good instructors who know how to articulate all that stuff to the Soldiers. And when they come here for 22 days, I want them to know that it’s all about them. It’s all about you and improving you, making you a better noncommissioned officer. Don’t be afraid to take on any task.”