



(U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Brian Hamilton taken July 31, 2018) U.S. Army Soldiers take an exam at the Education Center at Fort Knox, Kentucky, July 31, 2018.

NCOs and College Education

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In today's U.S. Army, higher education for a noncommissioned officer (NCO) is more than just a means for promotion points. It also plays a large part in a Soldier's personal and career development by teaching them to communicate effectively with others, think critically (necessary to support the mission command philosophy), and sets them up for success as they prepare to transition out of the military and into the civilian sector.

Potential over Points

Leadership is not a skill all people are born with. It is a skill set that is developed through experience and education (Vowels & Aude, 2019). Becoming an NCO is an important role in the Army, and is one in which a Soldier is not just great at their job, but must also become a proficient communicator with their subordinates in order to successfully accomplish the mission.

Travis Bradberry, author and leadership expert, states:

“Communication is the real work of leadership; you simply can’t become a great leader until you are a great communicator. Great communicators inspire people. They create a connection that is real, emotional, and personal. And great communicators forge this connection through an understanding of people and an ability to speak directly to their needs in a manner that they are ready to hear. (2016, para. 6)”

Communication

To build effective communicators, the Army has intensified its focus on writing in the NCO Professional Development System. This is to adequately prepare NCOs for leadership positions, where in addition to regular job and mission requirements, they’ll need to write situation reports, operation orders, personnel evaluations, counselings, award recommendations, memos, etc. (Ward, 2018). Taking college courses, especially early in a Soldier’s career, will prepare them to become effective communicators, and ultimately, better leaders.

Comprehension

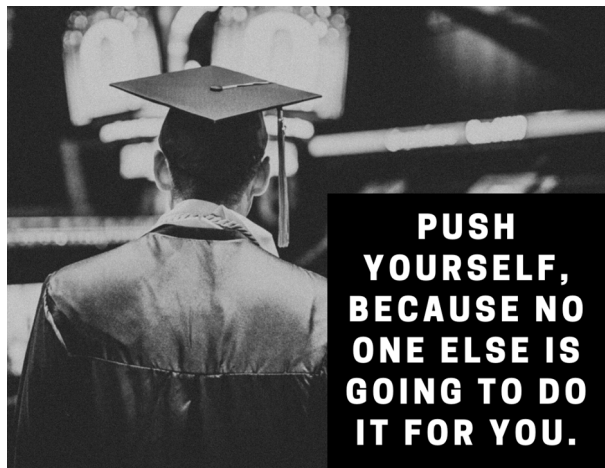
Earning a college degree enhances comprehension abilities and broadens one’s knowledge base, better preparing them for future scenarios they may encounter (“Virtual Reality Battlefield,” 2020). A pursuit of higher education can also increase mental agility – the ability to assess information and reason quickly – a valued skill in any future large-scale combat operation scenario, especially under the mission command philosophy where NCOs will have to make quick decisions, often without guidance from higher (Department of the Army, 2019a; 2019b; Porter, 2018).

Educational Opportunities

The Army offers tools and resources for Soldiers of all ranks to further their education. Currently, after 36 months of enlistment, Soldiers are eligible for full benefits under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill to put towards their education (Department of the Army, 2018). The Army also offers opportunities for senior NCOs to apply for positions in the Congressional and White House Fellowship programs (Votaw, 2019). To be eligible for this program an NCO must have a bachelor’s degree, and upon completion of these programs, NCOs will earn a master’s degree and gain valuable experience working with Congressional staff. Additionally, upon completion of the Sergeants Major Academy, a sergeant

major is now able to earn a master’s degree and become an instructor at the academy (Myers, 2019).

It is important that Soldiers are aware of these educational opportunities. It is a leader’s responsibility to encourage their Soldiers to take advantage of them, while also doing so themselves. Additionally, by ensuring their Soldiers are afforded the chance to seek educational opportunities, they are fostering a more knowledgeable enlisted force.



(Graphic courtesy of GoArmyEd)

Conclusion

Earning a degree while in the U.S. Army is difficult. With deployments, training cycles, and days filled with tasks, ranges, and needs of the Army, it can be challenging to fit in the time to study. Soldiers must learn to manage their time wisely and not get overwhelmed. Soldiers from all ranks and backgrounds have found ways to continue their education.

Furthering your education makes you a more well-rounded leader and increases your critical thinking, communication, and comprehension skills. You will be more competitive for promotion in the senior ranks and better prepared to transition out of the Army. Start preparing now even if it takes years to accomplish, a college degree enhances any career choice (military or civilian). ■



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