



(U.S. Army photo by Danielle O'Donnell taken July 30, 2018) A U.S. Army Soldier conducts online distance learning as part of the Distributed Leader Course IV in preparation for the Master Leader Course at Fort Bliss, Texas, July 30, 2018.

Restructuring NCO PME

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The modern noncommissioned officer (NCO) in the United States Army is better equipped, educated, and trained than ever before. The NCO professional military education (PME) system includes both resident and distance learning courses, producing well-rounded and ready leaders at all levels. This article examines streamlining the NCO Professional Development System process by aligning training and educational goals to achieve a more efficient education system.

Current State

BLC

The Basic Leader Course (BLC) is the foundation of the Army's institutional education system for NCOs. BLC prepares Soldiers transitioning from the junior ranks into direct-level leadership roles within their organizations ("Basic Leader Course," 2020). The BLC curriculum is

four weeks in length, branch immaterial, and standardized across the Army. According to the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence (NCOLCoE), BLC "prepares corporals and specialists to execute the duties of a team leader" (NCO Leadership Center of Excellence [NCOLCoE], n.d.a., para. 1). In addition to BLC, the Army maintains five other levels of PME, all preceded by a distance learning requirement designed to prepare NCOs for the associated resident course.

ALC

After BLC is the Advanced Leader Course (ALC), which develops junior leaders' direct-level leadership skills within their career management field (CMF). ALC focuses on leadership and technical skills so NCOs will effectively lead squad and platoon-sized units ("Advanced leader course," 2018, para. 1). This course is CMF-specific and as such, the proponent centers of excellence develop the program of instruction.

SLC

The Senior Leader Course (SLC) is branch-specific and prepares NCOs to become sergeants first class. It provides an opportunity “to acquire the leader, technical, and tactical skills, knowledge, and experience needed to lead platoon and company-size units” (“Senior Leader Course,” n.d., para. 1).

MLC

The Master Leader Course (MLC) and Sergeant Major Course (SMC) revert to a branch immaterial structure, focusing on NCO education instead of training. According to the NCOLCoE, the MLC is “designed to challenge and educate selected Sergeants First Class in the areas of professional writing, communication skills, public speaking, critical thinking, organizational and command leadership, management skills” (NCOLCoE, n.d.b., para. 1).

SMC

The Sergeant Major Course (SMC) consists of a common core curriculum and prepares students for entry-level sergeants major positions. In 2019, the U.S. Army Sergeant Major Academy received accreditation and students are now able to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree after completing the course.

Command Sgt. Maj. Jimmy Sellers, commandant of the NCOLCoE, stated, “This accreditation is paving the way for our NCO Corps to focus in on taking care of, and leading Soldiers. It allows them to focus on leadership, to develop individually, and spend less time in college classes,” (NCOLCoE, 2019, para. 5).

NLC

The capstone of NCO PME is the Nominative Leader Course (NLC). Structured as a two-week development course, the NLC focuses on educational curriculum preparing senior NCOs for strategic-level leadership. According to the U.S. Army War College, “the course content is based on critical knowledge gaps derived from analysis of surveys and interviews of Army Senior Offi-

cers and NCO Leaders, along with SMA guidance and NLC student feedback” (“Nominative Leader Course,” n.d., para. 6).



(U.S. Army photo courtesy of XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg NCO Academy taken Feb. 25, 2020) U.S. Army Soldiers conduct individual training on land navigation as part of the XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg Noncommissioned Officer Academy’s Basic Leader Course, North Carolina, Feb. 25, 2020.

Levels of Leadership

In *Army Doctrine Publications 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession*, leadership can be divided into three categories: direct, organizational, and strategic (Department of the Army, 2019). Leadership development can be divided into training and educational experiences.

For the purpose of this article, sergeants, staff sergeants, and sergeants first class are categorized at the direct leadership level. For first sergeants and master sergeants, this is generally the first rank they are utilized at the organizational leadership level. For that reason, master sergeants, first sergeants, battalion and brigade sergeants major, and command sergeants major are categorized at the organizational level of leadership. Beyond the brigade level, sergeants major and command sergeants major are brought into strategic-level leadership roles.

For NCOs in the direct level of leadership category, training is most important. Junior-level leaders need to be experts in their fields, as most of their leadership responsibilities relate directly to their military occupational specialty (MOS). As leaders move into the organizational level of leadership, responsibilities expand, and their decisions impact Soldiers beyond their command. Often, this is the first time they will be a part of a staff, so knowledge beyond their MOS is critical.

Finally, as NCOs move into strategic roles, their original MOS matters even less. Their knowledge and experience shapes their ability to transmit strategic messages and make large-scale decisions and recommendations that affect the entire Army (Department of the Army, 2019).

Desired End State

There is a solution that could structure PME efficiently to meet the demands of today’s leadership requirements. Currently, BLC is branch immaterial, but grouping BLC and ALC under a CMF-specific

curriculum would better address the challenges of direct-level leadership and develop the skills to operate effectively within an NCO's organization. This would allow SLC, MLC, SMC, and NLC to all be branch immaterial and educationally driven. Under this strategy, the NCOLCoE would primarily focus on NCO education instead of training. Essentially, this strategy would switch the current roles of BLC and SLC in order to thoroughly train junior NCOs in their MOS, and prepare senior leaders for organizational and strategic-level leadership demands.

Conclusion

Under the proposed strategy, junior-level leaders would develop their direct-level leadership CMF-specific skills at the lower tiers of NCO PME. Thus, educating senior NCOs outside their respective fields and preparing them for organizational and strategic levels of leadership. This



(U.S. Army photo courtesy of Fort Leonard Wood MCCoE NCO Academy taken June 11, 2019) A U.S. Army Soldier conducts an in-ranks inspection during Mission Command Center of Excellence NCO Academy's Advanced Leader Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, June 11, 2019.

strategy supports the Army's continuous adaptive learning model and focuses on the needs of the NCO. ■

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