



U.S. Army Sgt. Stephanie Harp, an Online Army National Guard Academic Training Suite Domain administrator works to standardize courses for the Online Army National Academic Training Suite, at the Army National Guard Safety Support Center, Fort Rucker, Alabama June 9, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Jordan Arnold)

# The Challenges of Distance Learning

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**T**he U.S. Army is increasingly looking to virtual and distance education to allow noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to fulfill their educational requirements. In the current operational environment, the Army has transitioned many of its professional military education courses to the distance learning domain (Cox, 2020). The concern is that there still exists a disparity in graduation rates between resident (on campus) and distance learners. Students attending the distance version of the

Sergeants Major Course (SMC) are often unprepared for the rigors and unique obstacles of distance education. This places them at a greater risk of failing than their counterparts in the resident course. This article will examine the research on distance education and determine the highest probable factors for failure or success, allowing students and institutions to adequately prepare for these challenges. If prepared properly, U.S. Army Soldiers can succeed no matter their physical location.

## Senior NCO Education

The Army has embraced distance education to develop Soldiers of all ranks. Some senior NCOs may remember the yellow books from the Army Correspondence Course Program (ACCP) of the 1980s. Today's distance education programs are much more academically rigorous and resemble college and university coursework.

At the forefront of the U.S. Army's distance education is the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A). The SMC is the capstone course for the U.S. Army and NCOs from all services, as well as multi-national partners, attend the course. The program of instruction is either a 10-month resident program at the SGM-A campus located at Fort Bliss, Texas, or a two-year nonresident distance learning program.

Since its inception in 1972, one of the tasks the first commandant of the SGM-A, Col. Karl Morton, and Command Sgt. Maj. William Bainbridge, had was to develop a "nonresident or correspondence" (Morton & Bainbridge, 1974, p. 32) version. The first nonresident course began in September 1975 with 50 students. Yet by the end of the two-year course, only 22 students graduated, resulting in an attrition rate of 56% (Honeycutt, McGraw, Crow, & Spooler, 1977).

Recent statistics show graduation rates for the nonresident program have improved from that first class; however, there are still many senior NCOs who do not complete the course. The current graduation rate for the nonresident course is approximately 74%, with a 26% failure rate (Roche, 2019). To put that into perspective, class 70 of the resident course graduated 693 of the 717 students who began the course – 96%, with only a 4% failure rate (O'Donnell, 2020).

The Army, its sister services, and multi-national partners depend on SMC graduates to assume senior enlisted positions throughout the force. To understand the high attrition rate in the nonresident course, U.S. Army leaders and students can look to ongoing research in the university setting.

## Research

A wide range of research exists about persistence in distance education; however, there are varying viewpoints as to the root cause of its challenges and how to address them. Arifin (2018) uses a broad perspective in his research and concludes placing all factors related to persistence into one of three categories: *Student factors*, *program factors*, and *environmental factors*.

### Student Factors

Student factors directly relate to the student such as experience, skills, and academic history. Some of these factors are controllable by the student while others may require the institution to provide resources. The following factors are the most commonly reported in modern research: *Time management*, *study skills/preparedness*, and *resilience*.

#### *Time Management*

Time management appears to be the single most significant factor in students withdrawing from



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st class Jerry Dickerson, a facilitator with the 101st NCO Academy, at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, uses the defense collaboration services website to meet with other facilitators in order to help meet the learning goals for students, March 3, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jedhel Somera)

distance education. Many learners enroll in distance education courses for the flexibility it provides (Bawa, 2016; Brown, 2017; Nash, 2005; Simons, Beaumont & Holland, 2018). Often, when students decide to withdraw from a distance education course, they cite a lack of time as a critical factor in their decision. Brown (2017) studied online doctoral students, and many who withdrew from the program cited time as a factor in their decision. Even among those who remained in the program, many stated that finding the time to complete their studies was a challenge.

Inversely, in Meyer's study, (2012) she states that students who remain in distance education courses score high in time management skills. Nash (2005) also cites similar findings showing time management skills are essential to successfully completing distance education. His research among community college students found time management issues as "the major reason they dropped or failed a course" (p.13). Both Arifin (2018) and Simons, et al. (2018) claim similar findings, proving time management is a concern in other countries as well as the U.S.

#### *Study Skills/Preparedness*

Study skills and course workload were also concerns among students withdrawing from courses. Nash (2005) found students who withdrew from courses claimed they were lacking in key study skills such as test-taking and memory recall.



Included in study skills is the ability to read and write critically. Brown (2017), as well as Parkes, Stein, and Reading (2014) found many online students are not prepared for high-level critical writing, even though they are comfortable in the online environment.

### **Resilience**

Simons et al. (2018) took a unique approach to examining student-based factors. In their research of students at The Open University, instead of examining factors that caused students to withdraw, they studied ones that improved student retention. The results of their survey found that two of the main resilient-based elements in determining student success were: motivation and self-belief.

### **Program Factors**

Program factors relate to the design of the course, academic institution, and academic support. It also consists of the instructor and their engagement in the class (Arifin, 2018).

### **Faculty**

Several researchers point to challenges with faculty as an obstacle to student persistence. Nash (2005) found some students had a perception of faculty members as not being supportive during their classes. Bawa (2016) claims oftentimes institutions put faculty members into an online teaching position and don't prepare them adequately for the unique challenges associated with distance education. She also found some faculty may have difficulty with technology or an unfavorable opinion of distance education.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are several studies where faculty were able to positively influence student retention. Both Meyer's (2012) and Arhin and Wang'eri's (2018) studies claim successful online students have a positive relationship and regular interaction with faculty and staff. Brown (2017) determined that instructors and advisors were critical in offering immediate support and this support was essential to student success.



(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.

### **Isolation**

The inherent isolation of the distance education environment can also pose challenges. Nash (2005) found some students often claimed they felt alone, which was a deciding factor in dropping their course. Thomas and Teras (2014) studied the correlation between a sense of community and persistence. Their research determined when instructors and course designers did not create a sense of community within the course, some students felt detached and lonely and considered withdrawing.

### **Instructional Design**

The way institutions design and teach their online courses also has significant influence on whether a student stays in a course. Christensen and Spackman (2017) developed a model to study how course design influences dropout rates. They analyzed two years of dropout data for 196 courses and graphed the data along the length of each class. Through their analysis, they can show where course redesigns are necessary to reduce the likelihood of a student dropping out.

### **Environmental Factors**

Environmental factors primarily consist of support from family, friends, co-workers, and fellow students. Family support is another critical factor in students persisting in their coursework (Bawa, 2016; Brown, 2017; Simons et al., 2017). In Brown's (2017) study, many doctoral students claimed they had the support of their families, but often felt guilt they were not available to assist with family responsibilities. Arifin (2018) determined many students at the Indonesia Open University required additional support from employers to find adequate time for their studies.

### **Mitigation Strategies**

Many researchers focused on mitigation strategies in their analysis. Basko and McCabe (2018) discuss the influence of instructor presence and describe three ways an instructor can have a positive effect: Creating an active social environment, providing a balance in course activities, and ensuring a sense of community. This positive environment can often be set in motion with a course orientation. Bawa (2016) describes the positive effect an orientation has on long-term persistence. Nash (2005) also states an orientation helps to ensure students understand expectations of the course. Arhin (2018) indicates an orientation should be specific to the program and not a general session.

### **Retention Models**

Several studies look at persistence with a multitude of focused outcomes. Joo, Lim, and Kim (2011) found learner satisfaction is a crucial component of course persistence. Meyer (2015) uses Tinto's Theory of Academic Departure to prove that for students to be successful, they need to integrate both socially and academically into an institution. And historically, Bean and Metzner's Nontraditional Under-

graduate Student Attrition Model finds that success is often tied to positive student and faculty interaction (1985).

## Summary

While there are many similarities in the research studies cited, every institution's problems and challenges with long-term persistence are unique. Students attending nonresident

courses will be successful if they prepare themselves for the challenges of distance education, have a realistic perspective, and have access to academic support and resources. This will ensure Soldiers can complete their education no matter their location, and the U.S. Army will have the talent needed to adequately fill senior NCO positions. ■

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