



U.S. Army Sgt. Maj. Jesus Pedraza gives a presentation as part of the Common Faculty Development Instructor Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, Jan. 4, 2018. (U.S. Army photo courtesy of NCO Leadership Center of Excellence Public Affairs)

# Rethinking Instructor Credentialing

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Currently, U.S. Army instructors are required to graduate from the courses they teach. As the battlefield becomes more complex, the paradigm for learning continues to shift from training to education. While credentialing requirements for instructors are necessary to produce desired learning outcomes, the graduation requirement may detract from producing the best possible force by disqualifying highly trained experts from certain teaching positions. This article offers a two-pronged solution by credentialing instructors per block of instruction instead of course and staffing officers and enlisted to both train and teach together to better share their varied experiences at the academies.

## The Current Problem

When not conducting collective training within their units or deploying around the world, Soldiers are often

stationed at institutional facilities improving their leadership skills. Each Army center of excellence is considered a unique institution; however, collectively they comprise the larger singular educational body that falls under the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. There is no doubt the Army takes a deliberate and serious approach to training, yet a thorough examination into some of its training principles reveals it may be time for an overhaul to continue to maintain the best trained and most lethal army in the world.

One example of a doctrinal philosophy that should be re-examined is found in *TRADOC Pamphlet 350-70-3: Faculty and Staff Development*. In this chapter there is clear and precise language specifying military instructors and developers must "... be a graduate of the course to be taught" (Department of the Army, 2018, p. 14). On the surface, it is a logical concept seen across the institution-

al domain. Presumably, the best qualified personnel to teach new paratroopers how to safely exit an aircraft are other school-trained paratroopers. But there is also an existing loophole watering down the system.

### Solution 1: Expand Instructor Credentialing

As an example, we'll focus on the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) at Fort Bliss, Texas. Students at the SGM-A are taught numerous subjects such as military writing, history, civilian-military (civ-mil) relations, Army / joint operations, and leadership, and many others. Under current doctrine, both military and civilian instructors who teach those subjects must be SGM-A graduates, i.e., current or former sergeants major.

Also consider that in 2015, the academy was assigned its first cohort of fellowship instructors; all sergeants major recently awarded master's degrees in education. Part of a program where the SGM-A began conferring collegiate degrees, et, rhetorically speaking, in what university would a teacher teach history with a degree in education and no history credentials? Presumably, physics teachers teach physics and art teachers teach art. However, by requiring all SGM-A instructors be SGM-A graduates with primarily the same degrees, the level and degree of specialization students receive gets

watered down. Simply being a graduate of a course does not mean someone is the most qualified or capable of teaching that course. Should civilian educators who specialize in specific areas not be allowed to teach at the academy if they're teaching within their expertise?

Furthermore, should doctors teach CPR or anatomy in a Tactical Combat Casualty Care course if they did not graduate from that specific course? Could a civilian master parachutist with 15,000 jumps not teach free-fall parachuting techniques just as well, if not better, than a military parachutist with 100 jumps? There are obviously specialized aspects (such as oxygen equipment, rigging weapons, etc.) civilian instructors might not be familiar with and are best left to military experts; but for some of the curriculum, civilians may have more real-world experience. A Vietnam veteran with multiple

combat patrols on a long-range reconnaissance team has plenty to offer students at the Army's Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader's course, former graduate or not. Denying students instructors who mastered their craft hinder Soldiers' growth and development.

To address this system loophole, it is important to note that a need for operational experience as a Sergeant Major does exist in *certain* lessons taught at the SGM-A. Yet, due to Army manning issues, there have been cases where graduating students were offered an opportunity to enroll into the graduate degree fellowship ("USASMA Fellowship Program," 2020). These newly promoted sergeants major are then assigned to instructor positions at the academy with zero experience in the operational field as E-9s, exemplifying a major shortcoming in the credentialing processes. A way to improve and streamline the educational process is to credential instructors depending on their assigned block of instruction and not the course. This would add variety and expertise to any Army course.

### Solution 2: Cross-Training Officers and NCOs

Recently, the *NCO Journal* published an article titled "Bridging the Officer-NCO PME Divide." Fust and Howard (2021) point out that while curriculums

between the two ranks overlap, collaboration and interaction do not. The premise was not deeply explored, but it certainly has substantial merit. While the authors suggested that creating opportunities between the Command and General Staff College and the SGM-A would strengthen the Army, another

course of action may be even simpler than that. Why not assign officers to teach at the SGM-A?

The SGM-A prides itself on the fact that it is entirely noncommissioned officer (NCO) staffed, manned, and led. Yet our commissioning sources (Officer Candidate School, Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and the U.S. Military Academy) are not entirely officer led. NCOs are assigned as platoon training, advising, and coaching (TAC) officers and are instrumental in building the initial trust between the officer and enlisted ranks. Remov-



A student participates in a ghillie wash, an event testing the strength and durability of a ghillie suit, as part of the U.S. Army Sniper School at Fort Benning, Georgia, Feb. 5, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Patrick A. Albright)

ing these NCOs from the officer development process would be detrimental to the Army and the NCO Corps.

So, when the SGM-A teaches Army staff operations, why not have an educator who has experience as an executive officer teach what executive officers do, rather than a sergeant major who has just observed them (and assuredly in some cases, not even that)? Almost every graduate of the academy (with some exceptions) will work for an officer, and yet not one officer is *directly* involved in the institutional training at the E-9 level of NCO professional military education. Creating opportunities for officer and enlisted Soldiers to learn together is a great start, but even more can be done. They should also teach together in institutions of higher learning. As a result, Soldiers would be taught a greater level of lethality and survivability with the cross-pollination occurring with the exchange of instructors to teach in other schoolhouses.

## Conclusion

Being a graduate of a course is not synonymous with being the best or most qualified to teach that course. To produce the best trained fighting force in the world, the U.S. Army must re-examine the criteria used to find and credential instructors. Additionally, training officers and enlisted Soldiers together produced proven results in the



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Brian Rutz, a U.S. Army Airborne School instructor, checks the static line for Sgt. John Bowman, an Aerial Delivery Specialist with the 165th Quarter Master Brigade Aerial Delivery Service, at the Clay National Guard Center, Marietta, Georgia, Nov. 29, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jeron Walker)

operational force; and it is time to further integrate them in the NCO educational realm as well. Finding instructors with depth of knowledge in specific fields provides deeper learning than the current model allows. Ultimately, a smarter, better-educated Soldier is a deadlier Soldier, ready to fight, survive, and win on any battlefield. ■

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