



NCOs see college education as providing a professional leg up in the ranks and the post-military civilian workforce. The Army must better communicate the skills higher education cultivates, though. The result? Better degrees and battle preparedness. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

More Than Promotion Points: NCOs and College Education

By 1st Sgt. Wolfgang O. McLachlan

59th Signal Battalion

Ask any NCO if a college degree is important, and you will likely hear “yes.” From centralized NCO Evaluation Board After Action Reviews (AARs) to Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development (NCOPD) discussions, the message that higher education highly influences enlisted Soldiers’ development is routinely echoed across the force. However, ask them *why* a college

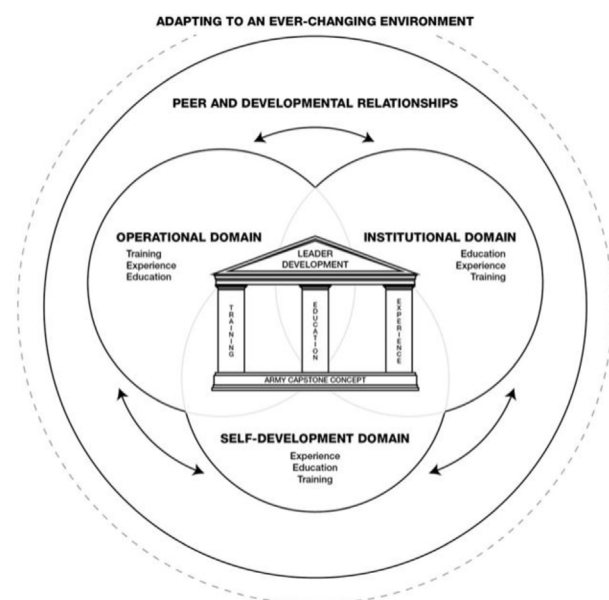
education is important, and you will likely hear, “I don’t know” or “because the Army thinks it’s important.” Those are the answers I often received while researching my doctoral dissertation. The Army’s efforts to ensure enlisted Soldiers understand why a college education is necessary for their development are so far off the mark that they aren’t even hitting paper.

The Current Messaging

Four prominent publications that emphasize a college education's importance are:

- DA PAM 600-25 (U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide)
- AR 621-5 (Army Continuing Education System)
- centralized NCO Evaluation Board AARs
- Soldier's Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) career map on the Army Career Tracker website

They emphasize the need for enlisted Soldiers to include college education in their holistic developmental planning. First, DA PAM 600-25 highlights that higher education is a component of the self-development domain by stating, "civilian education and military professionalism are not mutually exclusive, they are mutually supporting" (Department of the Army, 2023a). The figure below also graphically represents this sentiment, outlining the Army leader development model.



DA Pam 600-25, Army leader development model

AR 621-5 supports this position, stating, "the intent of the structured self-development program is to bridge the gap between operational and institutional domains and set conditions for continuous learning and self-improvement" (Department of the Army, 2019).

This publication outlines the need for higher education by stating, "leaders develop through a combination of military training, education, and experiences supported by institutional training



Command Sgt. Maj. John Folger, center, leads the promotion board of the A Battery "Assassins," 2-15 FA battalion along with three first sergeants. Board president Folger and the others met at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, on Aug. 15, 2023. A study revealed that senior NCO raters and senior raters view pursuing a college education as cultivating beneficial skill sets, and they see it as a distinguishing factor for candidates. (U.S. Army photo by 2nd Lt. Daphney Black)

and education, operational assignments and self-development." The following benchmarks outline timelines for enlisted Soldier levels of degree obtainment:

1. Begin postsecondary studies during the first five years of enlistment.
2. Earn an associate degree from an accredited educational institution or complete an education goal between the fifth and 15th year of service.
3. Complete a bachelor's degree from an accredited educational institution by the 20th year of service.

Next, centralized NCO evaluation board AARs present a well-defined narrative of the board members' expectations regarding civilian education's role in tabulating that year's Order of Merit List (OML) for each grade plate. The most recent staff sergeant (SSG), sergeant first class (SFC), and master sergeant (MSG) evaluation board AARs contained the following insights.

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 SSG evaluation board AAR said NCOs who "earned an associate degree or higher" (Department of the Army, 2023c) took an essential step in fulfilling the total Soldier concept of holistic self-development. The FY 2023 SFC evaluation board AAR highlighted that "specific to civilian education, board members noted that most NCOs valued and embraced self-development as outlined in DA PAM 600-25" and "the majority of those NCOs properly documented achievement of an associate's degree or work towards a baccalaureate degree or higher" (Department of the Army, 2022a).

Continuing this theme, the FY 2023 MSG board AAR said that "board members looked favorably upon candidates who were pursuing and completing a college

degree” and “the board recommends SMs continue to seek Civilian Education opportunities” (Department of the Army, 2023b). Throughout these centralized NCO evaluation board AARs, pursuing a college education is a common theme repeatedly identified as a distinguishing factor for candidates.

Finally, Soldiers’ MOS career maps on the Army Career Tracker website highlight recommended college programs paired with particular MOSs and grades. These suggestions simplify Soldiers’ academic journeys, making it easier to achieve educational goals. When incorporated into Soldiers’ monthly or quarterly counseling, they help develop, monitor, and readjust progress against established timelines.

Foundation of the doctoral research study

I started my doctoral program in early January 2019, inspired by a sergeant major’s doctoral work. I decided to revolve my study around Army senior NCOs and the driving forces behind their decisions to pursue or forgo college education. Next, I narrowed my research population to Signal Corps SSGs to command sergeants major (CSM), their Raters, and Senior Raters. Although the research study focused on senior NCOs, I added SSGs because they become the pool’s newest senior NCOs each year. These decisions ensured compatibility among the research project’s participants and had the broadest applicability possible while preserving the project finding’s reliability. With the population identified, two research questions formed the foundation for the qualitative method research approach:

RQ1: *What are the motivating factors behind Signal Corps senior NCO decisions to pursue or not pursue a college education?*

RQ2: *How do senior leaders perceive the roles and organizational benefits of college education to Signal Corps senior NCOs?*

I designed an anonymous 15-question online survey with an informed consent agreement and 15 demographic, Likert-scale (a scientific psychological scale commonly used in scaling responses in survey research), and open-ended short-response questions.

To ensure anonymity, the questionnaire did not ask for personally identifiable information and operated from March 21 to June 3, 2022. In all, 46 participants answered the online survey. They hailed from 13 Signal Corps Brigades and other eligible Army organizations.

Demographic response data

Gender

Of the 46 survey participants, 38 (82.60%) were male, seven (15.21%) were female, and one (2.17%) declined to answer. This male-to-female ratio closely aligns with the 2022 demographics profile of Army

active component demographics, consisting of 84.3% male and 15.7% female (DOD, 2022b).

Age

The participants’ ages ranged from 27 to 57 years old, with the median age being 40.5 years old. Age groups consisted of three (6.52%) participants in their 20s, 16 (34.78%) in their 30s, 23 (50%) in their 40s, and three (6.52%) in their 50s, with one (2.17%) participant declining to answer. This diversity offered an exceptional array of life experiences.

Participant’s current rank

Participating NCOs, SSG to sergeant major (SGM), comprised 36 of the total 46 participants (78.26%), with the remaining answers comprising eight (17.39%) commissioned officers from second lieutenant to colonel, one (2.17%) warrant officer 2, and one participant (2.17%) who declined to answer. The enlisted-to-officer ratio closely aligns with the 2022 demographic profile of Army active-duty members, consisting of 79% enlisted and 17% officer (DOD, 2022b). This representation of NCOs and enlisted personnel gives this study an additional layer of credibility.

Highest level of civilian education

Participants’ levels of education ranged from high school diplomas to doctoral candidacy. Most possessed at least an undergraduate degree. A total of 45 (97.82%) participants responded, with one participant (2.17%) declining to answer. The wide arc of experiences provides insight into participants’ choices regarding academic self-development.

Should a college degree be required for senior NCO promotions?

Participants responded “Yes” (17 – 36.95%), “No” (22 – 47.82%), or “Unsure” (7 – 15.21%). They voiced their rationale about their responses in subsequent sections.

Ideal degree level for NCOs: SSG through CSM

Of the 46 survey participants, 44 (95.65%) responded to the recommended degree level for SFC and MSG, and two (4.34%) declined to answer. However, 45 (97.82%) responded to first sergeant (1SG) through CSM, and one (2.17%) declined to answer. Participant responses to this question highlighted the diversity of perceived benefits of a college education to senior NCOs. However, a common trend emerged: The ideal education level increased as the corresponding NCO leadership rank increased.

Findings Evaluation

This qualitative research study explored the dynamics influencing Signal Corps senior NCO decisions toward pursuing a college education and

their direct leaders' interpretations of these decisions. In response to RQ1, five themes emerged, with three explaining why participants chose to pursue a college education and two illuminating why they did not.

RQ1: Reasons given for pursuing a college education

1. **Promotion:** Participants overwhelmingly listed the desire to compete with their peers during annual centralized senior NCO promotion boards as the prime motivator behind their decision to pursue a college education.
2. **Marketability in the civilian workforce:** Several senior NCOs listed obtaining a college degree as a step in their preparations for transitioning into post-military civilian employment.
3. **Self-Development:** Many respondents attributed their pursuit of a college education to an intrinsic love of learning, drawing parallels between continued education and reaching one's full potential.

RQ1: Reasons given for not pursuing a college education

1. **Industry technical certifications:** The primary reason NCO participants who chose not to pursue a college degree said they wanted to pursue applicable industry technical certifications instead.
2. **Work/life balance:** NCOs often cited concerns about balancing personal and professional demands with college requirements as reasons they chose not to pursue higher education.

RQ2: Perceived beneficial skills developed while pursuing and obtaining a college education

The study revealed senior NCO raters and senior raters viewed pursuing a college education as cultivating beneficial skills. Their authored NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER) assessments reflect this outlook. Benefits of a college education include:

1. Unlocks individuals' intellectual potential
2. Further refines problem-solving skill sets
3. Leads to higher reading and writing comprehension levels
4. Develops holistic and asymmetrical thinking
5. Fosters creativity
6. Develops proper time management skills
7. Cultivates intrinsic drive and self-reliance



Sgt. Taiwo Olubode, a Signal Operations Support Specialist, renders salute to Command Sgt. Maj. John Folger, during the A Battery "Assassins," 2-15 FA battalion's promotion board at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, on Aug. 15, 2023. Most NCO study participants saw the desire to be competitive with peers and get promoted to the next grade as the driving force behind pursuing a college education. (U.S. Army photo by 2nd Lt. Daphney Black)

8. Enhances ability to integrate available resource material in developing solutions to problems
9. Improves self-confidence
10. Stimulates convergent, divergent, and lateral thinking

Implications

Most NCO study participants saw the desire to be competitive with peers and get promoted to the next grade as the driving force behind pursuing a college education – not progressing in their cognitive development. Their feedback often stated that attending college would be viewed favorably by their raters and senior raters, reflect positively on their NCOERs, and help to secure stronger positions on the OML.

However, few NCO participants understood their Rater and Senior Rater's rationale behind viewing such academic pursuits in a favorable light. The desired endgame was simply obtaining a college degree, not the benefits cultivated through its pursuit.

Most enlisted Soldiers don't understand a college education's role in self-development. This gap nurtures an environment in the NCO Corps where obtaining a degree, regardless of field of study or difficulty, became the focus over the skills the academic journey cultivates.

This environment sets a dangerous precedent: Soldiers may view an easily obtainable online degree in a discipline not applicable for their MOS as on par with a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) degree or one that aligns with their MOS career map. To allow enlisted Soldiers to realize their full potential, the Army must provide clearly defined intent rooted in published doctrine, outlining the skills they should cultivate through a college education.

Recommendations

An overarching theme of this study was that Soldiers of all ranks are unaware of the cognitive benefits gained from pursuing a college education.

Most believe that a college education serves mainly to keep them competitive for promotion. The USARMY Pentagon HQDA DCS G-1 / Military Publishing Policy Directorate must clearly address and codify support in Department of the Army DA PAM 600-25 and AR 621-5.

Headquarters Department of the Army publications should present the list of desired cognitive skills

developed through college education and explain the *spirit of intent* behind the messaging. Then, senior enlisted leaders should discuss it with their Soldiers to ensure they understand the intent and focus on cultivating the skills rather than simply earning a degree.

The Army must take advantage of this lull between major wartime engagements to develop its enlisted Soldiers properly and realize their potential in all domains.

As we prepare for the next war which will inevitably call us to action, we will either set the conditions for success or find ourselves on the back foot. Prudence calls us to action. The choice is ours. ■

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1st. Sgt. Wolfgang O. McLachlan serves in the 59th Signal Battalion, supporting Department of Defense communication initiatives in the Arctic. Over his career, he has served as an Airborne infantryman with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, an infantry OSUT senior drill sergeant, and a signaller in the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command (SMDC). McLachlan is a Sergeant Audie Murphy Club member, has a bachelor's degree in human resource management, a master's in education – adult education and training, and a doctorate in educational leadership – higher education.



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