



Preparation, resilience, and support are the cornerstones of success at the Sergeants Major Course. While mentors and academy briefings provide valuable insights, each student's journey is uniquely their own. (AI image generated by *NCO Journal* staff)

Stories of Success and Failure

Observations from an Instructor's Desk

By Retired Sgt. Maj. Jesus Gonzalez

Sergeants Major Academy

Most who are selected to attend the Sergeants Major Course (SMC) have a general idea of what to expect, often shaped by mentors who attended in the past. However, the reality is that students' experiences are uniquely their own.

Expectations are outlined during the initial in-briefing before the course starts, and it's during this time that students begin to grasp what they must do to navigate the course successfully and graduate.

Master sergeants attending are no different from students at any level of the NCO Professional Development School (NCOPDS). They bring personal stories, diverse experiences, and varying challenges. Some move through the course seamlessly, while others face obstacles that test their resilience

and commitment. Understanding and preparing for the SMC's expectations is essential for success regardless of their circumstances.

Expectations

Many students entering the SMC rely on insights from mentors who share their own experiences. While such wisdom is valuable, students must recognize their journeys will be unique.

Upon enrollment, students attend an initial briefing outlining course expectations. Instructors provide detailed guidance and insights based on their direct interaction with students, ensuring a clearer understanding of the course's demands.

As students progress, they often find a rhythm

that allows them to navigate daily requirements more effectively. However, challenges can arise related to marital status, family responsibilities, personal struggles, or other circumstances. Each must internalize the expectations and use them as a foundation for success.

Tips on How to Navigate the Course

Students selected for the SMC are experienced leaders who, in their previous roles, have mentored and guided Soldiers. They often encourage their Soldiers to seek help or take a knee when overwhelmed, but one of their greatest challenges is following their own advice.

The academy offers numerous resources to support students, but accessing them requires self-awareness and the courage to ask for help. The first step is finding a peer, or “battle buddy,” to provide mutual support throughout the course. The importance of this connection cannot be overstated. It fosters accountability, encouragement, and shared understanding.

Instructors also play a crucial role in supporting students. Positioned on the front lines of student

interaction, instructors can identify when students are struggling and intervene before issues escalate. They must remind them of available resources and the consequences of poor decisions, emphasizing that seeking help is not a sign of weakness but a step toward success.

Failure and Success

Of the many students who have experienced the SMC, some have suffered in silence and made choices resulting in less-than-admirable results. Some arrive with circumstances that make it difficult to focus on the course’s rigor. In some cases, students’ pride or ego may prevent them from asking for needed help.

An Example of Suffering in Silence

During our Foundations block of instruction, I once had a student who appeared to be doing well and didn’t seem to be in a situation that could hinder his performance. As the course progressed, he struggled with personal challenges — including unresolved issues outside the classroom. These difficulties eventually led



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ABOVE: The Sergeants Major Course is not without challenges, but it's also an opportunity for growth, reflection, and success. Ultimately, the goal isn't just to graduate but to emerge stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for leadership's demands. (U.S. Army photo by Andrew Smith)

AT RIGHT: Preparation is key to successfully navigating the course's demands. For students with families, open communication about expectations and requirements fosters transparency and ensures mutual understanding. (U.S. Army photo by Amabilia Payen)



to decisions that affected his academic performance and standing in the course.

This example highlights the importance of seeking help when personal struggles arise. Doing so can prevent avoidable setbacks and allow individuals to successfully complete the course.

A Successful Challenge

Another student faced significant family responsibilities while attending the course, curtailing the ability to engage fully. He successfully managed his workload and completed the course by communicating these challenges and requesting and then getting instructor support.

This example demonstrates the value of resilience and leveraging resources during difficult times. Although the student was dealing with challenges, he communicated this to us. By doing so, he was able to use instructor

office hours as necessary to complete the curriculum. Despite the challenges, he graduated.

Preparation Will Lead to Success

The SMC is a demanding course. Preparation is key to its successful navigation. For students with families, open communication about the course's demands fosters transparency and ensures mutual understanding. For those who leave their families at a previous duty station, preparation provides peace of mind that they can manage the course without undue stress.

Adversity in life is inevitable, and resilience and a willingness to seek help are critical for overcoming challenges. Students who embrace these principles are better positioned to succeed and contribute meaningfully to their teams.

Conclusion

Preparation, resilience, and support are the cornerstones of success at the SMC. While mentors and academy briefings provide valuable insights, each student's

journey is uniquely theirs. Understanding expectations, asking for help, and leveraging available resources are critical steps in navigating the course and graduating.

The SMC is not without challenges, but it's also an opportunity for growth, reflection, and success. Students can overcome obstacles and reach their full potential by fostering connections with peers, communicating openly with instructors, and preparing thoroughly. Ultimately, the goal isn't just to graduate but to emerge stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for leadership's demands. ■

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