



The Advanced Education Program began as the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy Fellowship in 2015 through a partnership with Penn State University, integrating sergeants major into the Master of Education in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education program (Dawson, 2023). (U.S. Army photo by Andrew Smith)

# Advancing NCO Development Through Higher Education

*By Sgt. Maj. Daniel B. Shealy*

Sergeants Major Course Faculty

**I**n military and defense-related programs, shifts in the global security environment — such as the transparent battlespace, great-power competition, or hybrid warfare — drive curriculum updates to prepare leaders for contemporary and future challenges. The imperative to modernize military education is no longer optional; it is mission critical. For the Army profession to remain relevant, senior NCO education and training must evolve.

The educational approach must advance in step with changing demands, building on the tradition of adaptation and growth established in years past for senior NCOs. The U.S. Army NCO Academy (USANCOA) Fellowship program, long a cornerstone of NCO development, must accelerate its evolution by

incorporating new degree options to meet the demands of a 21st-century operational environment.

The Advanced Education Program (AEP) represents the latest evolution of the USANCOA Fellowship, reinforcing the NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS) which sustains senior leaders' professional growth.

## Continued Evolution

Programs regularly adapt in response to student, faculty, alumni, and external stakeholder feedback. This iterative process ensures academic quality, professional applicability, and long-term success. As the AEP enters a new and significant chapter in its ongoing evolution, and the USANCOA leadership, faculty, and institutional

partners must ensure the program flourishes by drawing lessons from the past.

The AEP has reached a pivotal moment, beginning a new and transformative phase in its evolution that conserves time and funding (NCO Worldwide, n.d.).

Safeguarding the program's longevity requires not only a forward-looking vision but also a deliberate reflection on past experiences to inform future success. One such pivotal experience is the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) Fellowship, which served as a foundational element in the program's evolution.

The expansion enhanced faculty expertise with a Master of Science in Instructional Design, Development, and Evaluation. Aligning the Fellowship within the appropriate institutional framework ensures its continued relevance, proper resourcing, and long-term sustainability.

This placement allows the program to build on lessons learned from previous cohorts while allowing it to adapt to future leader development needs. To further enhance this adaptability and relevance, the program will introduce career relevant curriculum.



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## Career-Tailored Curriculum

Beginning in 2026, sergeants major who apply for the AEP will have two degree paths with career-relevant curricula tailored to senior Army leaders.

It will incorporate courses in Master of Defense and Strategic Studies (MDSS) and Master Leadership Studies (MLS) (U.S. Army Human Resources Command, 2025).

The shift in the degree program's area of focus will specifically emphasize leadership and operational-level domains. These two newly introduced programs are designed to highlight and support senior NCO professional development.

By equipping learners with the knowledge and analytical

skills necessary to navigate the 21st century's complex challenges, the MDSS and MLS degrees prepare NCOs to contribute effectively to address evolving security threats and leadership issues facing tactical and operational levels of leadership (NCO Worldwide, n.d.).

As the profession evolves, the next chapter of senior NCO education is emerging and showing significant momentum.

## Evolving from the Fellowship to the AEP

The AEP develops senior enlisted leaders into scholar-practitioners who shape the NCO Corps' future. By selecting sergeants major and command sergeants major with both the potential and the commitment to educate future leaders, the AEP directly invests in the Army's intellectual capital (Department of the Army, 2025).

AEP candidates pursue either an MLS or an MDSS, completing the programs in residence and earning a graduate degree upon successful completion.

Beyond academic achievement, the AEP equips participants with the expertise and strategic perspective necessary to prepare the next generation of sergeants major to thrive in complex operational environments.

## Origins of the USASMA Fellowship

The AEP began as the USASMA Fellowship in 2015 through a partnership with Penn State University, integrating sergeants major into the Master of Education in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education program (Dawson, 2023). This initiative marked a pivotal step in aligning senior-enlisted leader development with advanced academic study.

In 2019, the Higher Learning Commission accredited the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to award undergraduate degrees to eligible students who completed the Sergeants Major Course (SMC), recognizing both the rigor of its curriculum and the faculty's academic credentials, including members who possess terminal degrees (Department of the Army, 2025).

That same year, as a result of organizational designation and realignment, the USASMA Fellowship was renamed the SGM-A Fellowship and expanded further by adding another academic institution, Syracuse University, which strengthened its credibility and broadened opportunities for professional development (Syracuse University School of Education, 2025).

By deliberately integrating academic rigor, leadership development, and operational relevance into their curriculum, the AEP transforms senior NCOs into leaders who can think critically, teach effectively, and lead in an era defined by complexity and change.

In doing so, the program not only strengthens professional military education but also reinforces the institutional readiness needed to meet emerging operational demands, while cultivating a more robust adult learning environment that empowers senior NCOs to engage, reflect, and apply knowledge more effectively.

### **Transitioning to a More Impactful Setting**

AEP will benefit from the academic rigor in an environment which advances senior enlisted leaders' academic and professional development. It will spearhead an innovative graduate education that prepares senior enlisted leaders for tomorrow's challenges and integrates higher education with the Army's professional military education system through its evolving partnership with the SMC.

This partnership will also reduce Army spending by minimizing expenses and associated operational costs (NCO Worldwide, n.d.).

It will foster expanded research, innovation, and instructional advancement opportunities, while reaffirming a collective dedication to cultivating leaders equipped to address emerging challenges in national defense and regional governance.

As the AEP deepens its engagement with the SMC, it will play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of tactical and operational thinkers and educators who will define and evolve the NCO Corps' future.

### **Master's in Defense and Strategic Studies**

The MDSS degree program enhances AEP members' professional development, offering them opportunities to advance their careers or pursue new roles in national defense, security, strategy, and policy.

The curriculum strengthens NCOs' understanding of both the contemporary operational environment and its future trajectory. MDSS is an interdisciplinary field drawing from security studies, international relations, foreign policy, history, economics, political science, regional studies, cybersecurity, and the evolving character of warfare (University of Texas at El Paso, 2025).

Designed for students and practitioners seeking to broaden their expertise, the program emphasizes strategic planning, interagency processes, military operations, diplomacy, defense budgeting, program management, research and development, and other core aspects of national security.

### **Master's in Leadership Studies**

The MLS degree program delivers a comprehensive leadership education integrating management, strategy, communication, and organizational behavior to develop leaders equipped for complex and dynamic operational environments.

It develops knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors essential for success in organizational leadership across both military and civilian contexts.

Through a carefully structured curriculum, participants engage with theoretical and applied perspectives that challenge them to think critically, analyze creatively, and communicate effectively.

The MLS program stresses ethical decision-making, adaptive thinking, and innovative problem-solving, ensuring graduates are not only competent in traditional leadership functions but are also capable of thriving in environments shaped by rapid change and uncertainty (University of Texas at El Paso, 2025).



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It equips leaders with the tools they need to navigate interagency collaboration, provide tactical and operational planning, and advise on global challenges. Graduates emerge as well-rounded professionals with the knowledge to influence organizations, mentor peers, and contribute meaningfully to institutional readiness and effectiveness.



The U.S. Army NCO Academy (USANCOA) Fellowship program, long a cornerstone of NCO development, must accelerate its evolution by incorporating new degree options to meet the demands of a 21st-century operational environment. (U.S. Army photo by U.S. Army NCO Academy)

Both MLS and MDSS integrate scholarly depth and operational relevance.

Through these roles, the AEP will shape and develop future senior leaders by modeling operational thinking, fostering collaborative cultures, and driving mission-focused innovation across their spheres of influence.

## Conclusion

The AEP's deliberate design reflects a commitment to producing leaders who embody intellectual agility, ethical judgment, and practical expertise.

This program advances the institutional framework for lifelong learning, equipping senior NCOs with the tools they need to lead with strategic foresight, operational competence, and a strong commitment to mentoring the next generation of leaders.

By integrating diverse perspectives and emphasizing critical analysis, effective communication, and adaptive leadership, the program equips graduates to succeed in increasingly complex organizational environments.

More importantly, the program's impact extends beyond individual development; it strengthens the institutions its graduates serve, fostering resilience, innovation, and long-term effectiveness.

As national security, policy, and organizational leadership challenges evolve, the AEP stands as both a testament to the value of professional education and a vital instrument for preparing the next generation of leaders to shape the future with confidence and competence.

Through continued transformation, the AEP provides a highly modular and rapidly adjustable program that will ensure advancing professional growth for future leaders. ■

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**Sgt. Maj. Daniel B. Shealy** serves as an instructor in the Department of Army Operations (DAO) at the U.S. Army NCO Academy's Sergeants Major Course (SMC). He is a Class 67 graduate and previously served as a command sergeant major, U.S. Army Transformation and Training Command (T2COM), and U.S. Army Western Hemisphere Command (USAWHC). He is a graduate of the Cohort 9 Fellowship at Syracuse University's School of Education, where he earned a Master of Science in Instructional Design, Development, and Evaluation. He also holds a Master of Arts in Defense and Strategic Studies from the University of Texas at El Paso.

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