



This second article in the Driving Change Series introduces Ultima Scholars at SGM-A, an initiative designed to enhance military education and encourage scholarly research. This effort aims to expand the Army's intellectual capabilities and address complex contemporary issues. (U.S. Army photo by Lara Poirrier)

The Ultima Scholars: Enhancing NCO Education Through Scholarly Research

By Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson

Sergeants Major Academy

“The society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting by fools.” – Thucydides

“Against boredom, even the gods themselves struggle in vain.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

I was bored in the Army and throughout my military education. Now, my classes weren't boring, nor were my assignments easy. Yet, I had untapped mental capacity and wished to challenge myself more.

The gods may have heard my request. The Army introduced the Harding Project in 2023 to renew

professional military writing and encourage professional discourse (Griffiths & Lipsky, 2023). In the brief time since, the Army's academic institutions have increased efforts to promote writing and rigor within their student population.

One result is the Ultima Scholars at the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A), beginning during Sergeants

Major Course (SMC), Class 75 (which convenes this month). In addition to supporting the Harding Project, the Ultima Scholars aligns with the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) scholars' programs.

Further, the Ultima Scholars will provide select SMC students with a challenge beyond the standard curriculum while developing potential solutions to complicated Army problems.

Composition of the Ultima Scholars

The Ultima Scholars consists of four lines of effort:

1. Organizational improvement
2. Leadership and psychology
3. The Army in the contemporary operating environment
4. Scholarly research.

Participants must complete 61.5 hours of classwork during their scheduled reflection and research time. These classes cover topics ranging from reframing organizations to data visualization. The curriculum considers the complexities moderating human behavior and the Army's challenges in the current operating environment.

In addition to the classes, students must complete diverse readings, maintain a learning journal, and produce a scholarly project written for publication and presentation to Army senior leaders. They can apply what they learn in the SMC and the project to address a complex Army problem.

Near the program's midpoint, the academy produces a list of issues students must use for their capstone assignment. It pairs each student with a faculty mentor and a topic in their field of interest. The students must thoroughly investigate and analyze their topic's existing academic research, thereby developing a solution. The project must include a paper, executive summary, and slide presentation.

The program is additional work. Since participants must complete all Ultima Scholars and SMC requirements, few students will have the bandwidth to complete the program.

The Ultima Scholars Selection Process

Due to the challenge of the Ultima Scholars, SGM-A academic leadership will select only high-performing students to participate. Here's how the application process identifies them: At the end of the first term, students who volunteer for consideration must submit a one-page statement of purpose with their core room instructor endorsement, last three evaluations, all DA Form 1059s, current academy scores, and unofficial copies of all transcripts.

Upon submission, the SGM-A department chairs and vice chairs evaluate candidates and rank them based on their academic performance and potential. Afterward, the commandant receives a ranked student

list for final approval. The SGM-A will limit the selection to 12 candidates for the inaugural cohort.

All participants must maintain eligibility by adhering to the program guidelines. They must complete all SMC assignments with a 90% or above, receive no derogatory counseling, and pass their Army Combat Fitness Test and height and weight requirements. Students who don't adhere to the guidelines will leave the program, but this will not affect their standing in the SMC. Due to the cumulative nature of the program, the SGM-A will not replace students who are removed.

The Reward

Multiple rewards await students who complete the program requirements. They gain the knowledge and skills necessary to offer solutions to organizational problems through scholarly research application. Future organizational leaders will possess capabilities rarely seen among Army NCOs.

The Army will also greatly benefit from these graduates. In addition to developing a higher level of knowledge than the traditional SMC graduate, the Ultima Scholars graduates will receive unique wording on their DA Form 1059, and the potential for strategic-level post-graduation assignments. The Sergeant Major of the Army, the Training and Doctrine Command command sergeant major, and the Commandant of the Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Center of Excellence and SGM-A will have an Ultima Scholars graduate assigned to their offices.

Conclusion

Today's world is dynamic and growing more complex. Many adversaries have become "near peers" who contest our collective will at every level while challenging our operational dominance in multiple domains.

Our greatest advantage over these threats is the NCO Corps and how the Army employs it. As the Army transitions to Multi-Domain Operations as its operational concept, NCOs must transition into multiple domains. To remain competitive and maintain a level of human capital overmatch, NCOs must continue cultivating additional capabilities and engaging in novel ways.

The Ultima Scholars program will develop up to 12 students but has the potential to expand in later years. As programs like the Harding Project and the scholars' programs at CGSC continue, the Army will drive transformation, favoring greater education levels across the force and encouraging programs similar to the Ultima Scholars.

Initiatives like these will reduce boredom among students unchallenged by military education. Ultimately, the Army will expand its collective intellectual capabilities and apply them to today's and tomorrow's complex problems. ■

References

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