

Mandatory Degrees for NCOs

By Major Dennis J. McGee

The original purpose of this article was to propose making college degrees a requirement for noncommissioned officers (NCOs), as it is for commissioned officers. However, research showed that there are already numerous programs to help Soldiers receive college credits to apply toward degrees. The focus now is to provide the critical resource of time for NCOs to get their degrees.

The United States Army has once again officially dedicated a year as the “Year of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO).” In 1989, then Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh, Jr., along with Army Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono and Sergeant Major of the Army Julius W. Gates, declared the Army theme for 1989 as the “Year of the NCO.” General Vuono viewed it as an opportunity to enhance the responsibilities and the status of the NCO Corps through programs that underscored the four enduring roles of the NCO: leader, trainer, role model, and standard-bearer. He authorized promotion of an additional 3,000 Soldiers to the grade of sergeant (E-5) during the last eight months of fiscal year 1989. Shortages in that grade accounted for more than 66 percent of all NCO vacancies. Approximately 60,000 of 202,000 specialists and corporals (E-4) were eligible to advance to sergeant. The Army estimated that a one percent increase in NCO operating strength caused a nearly two percent increase in the number of units reporting readiness ratings at or above their authorized level of organization. By his action, the chief of staff raised the NCO strength to nearly 276,000.¹

There is no doubt that today’s NCO Corps is unmatched anywhere in the world. The most frequently requested military-to-military security cooperation training program by other nations is for their NCOs to attend one of our NCO courses. Today’s NCOs are also products of the world’s best military education system. The NCO Education System (NCOES) runs the spectrum from entry level leader training at the Warrior Leader Course to the Sergeants Major Academy. Throughout the careers of all Soldiers, NCOs are

required to pass through these gates in the NCOES. The courses are all well structured and designed according to a set standard of learning.

In addition to NCO academies, the Army has encouraged enlisted Soldiers to advance their education by other means. By 1952, the Army had developed the Army Education Program to allow Soldiers to attain credits for academic education. This program provided a number of ways for the enlisted Soldier to attain a high school or college diploma.²

Perhaps one of the biggest discriminators for promotion to the senior NCO ranks is the lack of a college degree. This has become even more important now as the Army has become greatly concerned with retaining midgrade NCOs. Like most professions, if there is no longer a chance of promotion, then many will choose to leave that career field and change jobs. On average, most NCOs have completed their first enlistment and are beyond four years of service.

By that time, they have completed several military education courses, most of which are transferable as civilian education credits. The various programs offered by the Army Continuing Education System (ACES) permit Soldiers to take advantage of online colleges and universities that offer college credit for military training and education. Additionally, these post-secondary programs offer tuition assistance, flexible degree completion timelines, and civilian licensing or certification.³

The Department of Veteran Affairs administers the various Montgomery-GI Bill programs that provide funding for college courses. There are also other programs that assist Soldiers with associate and baccalaureate degree programs through accredited colleges and universities and provide credit for Army institutional schooling and professional credentialing or licensing, such as—

- Army University Access Online (eArmyU)
- College of the American Soldier (CAS)



- Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges—Army Degrees (SOCAD)
- Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL)⁴

The challenge is finding the time to complete these degree requirements outside of the Army professional NCOES. NCOs who have college degrees have usually completed them on their own time, after duty hours, in deployed combat zones, or over many weekends, usually taking several years.

If the Army is serious about recognizing its professional NCO Corps, then it should provide the opportunity for NCOs to complete their degrees either during or following one of their NCOES courses. Ideally, Soldiers attending a Basic or Advanced NCO Course (BNCOC/ANCOC) should have the opportunity to complete their associate's or bachelor's degree. The current operational tempo causes many of today's leaders to be reluctant to release their NCO leaders to attend these schools. If the Army would make it mandatory for NCOs to complete college degrees, then this could serve as an impetus to force units to send NCOs to their respective NCOES courses on time. After, or in conjunction with, the course the NCOs could complete required college courses while on temporary duty away from the distractions of a unit, in an academic environment surrounded by their peers.

Another area of concern with mandatory degrees would be the types of degree required and whether they should be in any specific functional area. The Army has many examples of professionals who perform a trade but are not officially accredited or recognized by their profession or career field. As NCOs begin to take on leadership roles, they are placed in positions within the profession of arms that require them to be experts in their field or trade. For example, an engineer equipment operator must be trained and licensed just like a civilian crane operator; surveyors must be educated on how to properly use surveying instruments, just as a state-licensed surveyor is; and a prime power specialist must be qualified much like a certified electrical contractor. Another more generic comparison would be a company first sergeant who holds a bachelor's in human resources. The first sergeant will have already completed numerous NCOES courses and is responsible for running the day-to-day operations of a company of 75 to 150 Soldiers, equivalent to a medium-size business. Since these Soldiers are receiving education and training similar or identical to

their civilian counterparts, they should be receiving the same state or national licensing or certification.

The Army Career Tracker program⁵ is designed to bring together under one portal all the educational resources available to guide Soldiers along a career path or military occupational specialty. The advantages of having this program complementing the NCOES have yet to be realized, but the Army should do more. Specifically, the Army should make—

- An associate degree a requirement for promotion to staff sergeant.
- A bachelor's degree a requirement for promotion to master sergeant.
- Time available at BNCOC and ANCOC to complete these degrees.

As the Army focuses this year on its NCO Corps and continues to transform the NCOES, it should make strides similar to those that were made 20 years ago during the last "Year of the NCO." 

Major McGee is an engineer officer attending the School of Advanced Military Studies at the United States Army Command and General Staff College. Previous assignments include brigade operations and training (S-3) officer, 130th Engineer Brigade; battalion S-3 officer, 84th Engineer Battalion; and Commander, Alpha Company, 249th Engineer Battalion (Prime Power), Fort Lewis, Washington.

Endnotes

¹History, "2009—The Year of the Noncommissioned Officer," <<http://www.army.mil/yearofthenco/history5.html>>, accessed 12 May 2009.

²Ibid.

³United States Army Human Resource Command website, "Army Continuing Education Fact Sheet," <<https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/media/factsheets/aces.htm>>, accessed 12 May 2009.

⁴Credentialing Opportunities Online website, <<https://www.cool.army.mil/overview.htm>>, accessed 12 May 2009.

⁵Initiatives, "2009—The Year of the Noncommissioned Officer," <<http://www.army.mil/yearofthenco/initiatives1.html>>, website, accessed 12 May 2009.

Not a single one of us can afford to limp through our military life on the crutch of limited education.... Civilian education certainly enhances the individual's personal and professional value and especially the NCO's.... We aren't talking about an entry on a service record. We're talking about an individual acquiring more tools which will assist in daily living and certainly in the performance of military duties.

—SMA Leon L. Van Autreve, "Walking Tall—and Eager," *Soldiers*, February 1974, p. 33