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Educating the Enlisted Force: A Message for NCOs

by

Sergeant Major Kenneth M. Buggs

Keeping America's smaller Army strong is a very challenging task for today's leaders. Maintaining a trained and ready force means we must focus on individual soldiers to ensure they reach their fullest potential while maximizing their combat effectiveness. An extremely important factor in our soldiers' achieving this goal is higher education. When we spend more resources on weapon systems than on educating our soldiers who must operate these systems, the Army has neglected one of its most valuable assets. The NCO Corps must encourage and support the efforts of their soldiers to complete college courses while serving on active duty. Higher education not only supports quality of life, but is also a combat multiplier and has been proven to reduce stress levels in soldiers. These are only a few of the benefits of higher education and its importance to today's force.

Higher education includes everything from improving functional academic skills and military occupational skill improvement training to actual college courses. College-level examinations, correspondence courses and Army course evaluations contribute significantly toward obtaining a college degree. Fortunately, these last three methods are free; unfortunately, not enough soldiers take advantage of them. Today, soldiers can take college classes through distance learning and the Internet; some schools even allow degree completion without ever entering a classroom! Many colleges will also come to military installations, including those overseas, to conduct classes during the lunch hour and after normal duty hours.

While soldiers in today's Army are better educated than they were 20 years ago, we must still break the mindset that the soldier's place is only on the battlefield and there is no time for a college education.

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We must eliminate the notion that if we educate our enlisted force, they'll leave the Army in search of better employment in the civilian sector. Studies by the U.S. Navy have concluded that one of the major contributors to their recent improved retention rates was higher education.

Soldiers are expected to have at least an associate's degree by the time they are promoted to sergeant major. The statistics of class 49 at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) indicate we are moving in the right direction. This class of 486 students consists of 252 students with an associate's degree or higher, 112 with one to four years of college with no degree, and 123 with a high school diploma or less than one year of college. The best way to improve these statistics is to start educating the force earlier and not wait until a soldier has nearly 20 years in service and is selected for promotion to sergeant major. The Army has a variety of educational programs available to you and your soldiers, but you, the NCO, must get out and research these for yourselves. Don't be afraid to bring the education center director to your organization to ignite the fire of higher education and self-improvement in your troops.

Soldiers encounter many obstacles that prevent them from improving themselves through higher education. Some of these cannot be breached, but many can be overcome with effective leadership. That is where the NCO Corps steps in. One of the primary reasons soldiers do not take college courses is the high operations tempo and the limited number of personnel to perform these missions. While this can delay educational progress, it should not be a reason to avoid the pursuit of a college degree. Another major factor hindering education is the lack of support from leaders, especially at lower levels. Unfortunately, many leaders still believe that because they never had the opportunity to go to college, neither should their soldiers. Encouragement and support for self-improvement is as important for soldiers as it is for your own children. We encourage our children to perform well in school so they can attend college and fulfill their potential, and we should do the same for our soldiers if we expect to maintain a strong, well-balanced force.

Many sources exist in the Army Continuing Education System to improve the self-development of our soldiers. However, none of them will work unless we get the soldiers involved. I have been in organizations where almost nobody worked on getting a college education, but once someone began a program, the fever spread like wildfire. Proper personnel and time management will ensure this fever does not detract from mission readiness. Time management is extremely critical if we are to allow soldiers to pursue higher levels of education. The organization and the soldiers must effectively manage valuable time between deployments to maximize educational opportunities. This can be accomplished by reducing the number of late formations and the waiting around to "get the word" before leaving for the day, or adjusting training schedules to accommodate class hours. Another technique is to periodically bring troops in from local field training to attend class and then return them to the field.

Time management is a two-way street. If the organization is willing to allow scheduling flexibility, the soldier must be equally committed to the system or it will not work. The challenge facing us today is to recognize the significant role higher education plays in combat readiness and how it benefits our soldiers. The intent of higher education is not to ensure that soldiers achieve a doctorate-level degree before leaving the service, but to allow them to reach for their dreams while maximizing their combat effectiveness. Never underestimate a soldier's potential or desire to succeed. A classic example is one of the students at USASMA who entered the service without a high school diploma and is currently finishing a master's degree.

The more we as NCOs encourage and support our soldiers' efforts to improve themselves through higher education, the more confidence they will have in us as leaders during both peacetime and conflict. We must never forget that soldiers are our most valuable assets. We must continue to educate the enlisted force to ensure we have the most highly trained and combat-ready army of the 21st century.

(This essay by Sergeant Major Kenneth M. Buggs was selected as the winner of the 1999 AUSA Professional Writing Award at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. SGM Buggs is currently serving as Company Sergeant Major, B Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, Fort Bragg, NC.)