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# Building the New NCO Professional Development System

By Liston W. Bailey, Ph.D

The United States Army will soon evolve the NCO Education System (NCOES) to the Noncommissioned officer (NCO) Professional Development System (NCOPDS) beginning in October of 2015. NCOPDS addresses the need to better define and optimize NCO development for the Army. The impetus for development of the NCOPDS came about as a result of the NCO 2020 Study done through the TRADOC Institute for NCO Professional Development (INCOPD). NCO 2020 provided the Army with a set of action plans intended to strengthen and certify NCO professional competencies and technical skills.

From an enterprise perspective the NCOPDS will serve as the Army's production system for developing NCOs of the future. In the near term it is anticipated that the Army faces a period of preparation, management of anticipated resource constraints, and the ongoing need for organizational adaptability. NCOPDS will coordinate lines of effort and functions to effectively manage any required or unanticipated changes to leader development strategies for the future NCO cohort.

"NCO 2020 is not just a TRADOC program, it's an Army initiative that supports the Army profession as we move forward. It gets at a larger professional development system that enhances the performance of our NCOs."

building

CSM Daniel Dailey  
Sergeant Major of the Army

## Why is a Professional Development System Needed?

A more rigorous and effective system is needed for training NCOs now, not based on a desire to separate from past NCO traditions, but instead based on getting back to a focus on building a competent and professional NCO corps. Now and in the future, key competencies NCOs must exhibit remain consistent, as stated in DA Pamphlet 600-25:<sup>1</sup>

1. Leads by example
2. Trains from experience
3. Enforces and maintains standards
4. Takes care of Soldiers



5. Adapts to a changing world

However, innovative and updated strategies to build the next generation of NCOs are now required in light of the redefined Army Operating Concept (AOC), Army Mission Command doctrine, and the ever increasingly complex operating environment.<sup>2</sup> NCOPDS will sequentially build the skills and competencies of NCOs across learning domains: institutional, self-development, and operational. At the heart of this innovative production system will be a set of aligned interdependent processes and structures.<sup>3</sup> This means that key training and education systems must be part of a synchronized effort to make the NCOPDS work.

NCO 2020 study pointed out the need for a holistic system to track and measure how the Army is addressing performance gaps in training and education for NCOs. Moreover, one can argue that shaping leader development strategies for NCOs and decisions on key investments of resources, are better determined using measurement and analytical processes. Sources of data can then be reviewed so that Army leaders can create higher level plans, allocate resources, and change training and professional development for NCOs where needed.<sup>4</sup> Because change is always an unpredictable factor, the Army must continually adjust training and educational strategies necessary to design, build, and continually develop young NCOs as Army professionals.

Over the past decade, beginning with the Review of Education, Training, and Assignments for Leaders Study (RETAL) report of 2006, there has been a steady progression towards putting in place the right mix of policies and programs needed for sustaining life-long-learning and a professional development continuum for NCOs.<sup>5</sup>

Until now, development of NCOs focused on leveraging their experiences in the operational realm and providing individuals with exposure to technical training in the institution. Now, following a long period of war and deployments, the next generation of Soldiers can benefit greatly from a revitalized set of processes designed to shape their unique professional growth and career development needs. For example, one key line of effort for NCOPDS is a focus on ensuring that NCOs have exposure to the right types of education and broadening experiences as a part of their career lifecycle. Another example is in making sure that all NCOs, regardless of MOS, learn the principles of mission command and the Army Operating Concept as a part of attending NCO PME.

Moreover, as stated in the Army Capstone Concept, the future Army will be an integral part of a joint force, smaller, leaner, and more technologically advanced.<sup>6</sup> Mid-grade and senior NCOs regardless of MOS must become more knowledgeable regarding their



role within unified land operations, joint force planning, and the tenets of operational art.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the manner in which NCOs are educated and trained, must include adaptive and integrated learning experiences, across their learning continuum to build needed skills. NCOPDS when fully realized will also support the Chief of Staff of the Army's strategic priorities under Waypoint #2 associated with the need to for developing adaptive leaders in a complex world.<sup>8</sup>

The recently released Headquarters Department of the Army Executive Order 236-15 that directs the implementation of the NCOPDS outlines initial actions to stand up this professional development system as a framework for growing the future NCO cohort.<sup>9</sup>

The executive order states that NCOPDS must achieve the following objectives:

1. Provide the Army with an adaptable and resilient NCO corps.
2. Improve professionalism of the NCO corps
3. Provide challenging training, education, and practical experiences.
4. Identify and develop NCOs to serve at operational and strategic levels.

NCOPDS will be more than just a name change or rebranding of today's NCOES. The Army and TRADOC will be able to leverage NCOPDS to integrate all programs related to NCO development and to serve as the NCO subject matter expert for the Army leader development enterprise. This means that while the NCOES will continue develop courses and learning content for NCO PME, the broader NCOPDS will use a constellation approach to work lines of effort and to gather data necessary to provide TRADOC leaders with the most current information on how all professional development programs, policies, and new initiatives are working for the betterment of the NCO Corps.

### **Rebalancing Training, Education, and Experience**

During the past 5 years, reviews of the current NCOES have revealed opportunities to do better, in terms of a maintaining a rigorous and relevant system, for educating and training NCOs. Numerous senior leader surveys and Center for Army Leadership studies have supported the imperative to close gaps in the way training is conducted within unit and institutional domains for the NCO. For example, recent survey results have suggested that many leaders see NCOs as needing more development of interpersonal skills for



effectively leading their subordinates. There are also perceptions among Army leaders that the NCO role in developing subordinates is a professional leadership competency that needs improvement.

These kinds of performance gaps will be closed for the NCO cohort through creating relevant structured self-development and institutional learning content that will then transfer back to the unit of assignment. In order to make this vision a reality, Army school proponents, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy and the new Army University (ArmyU), will develop common learning content that all NCOs should receive regardless of their MOS. NCO PME will also benefit from the new ArmyU model based on its focus on accreditation, academic rigor, enterprise solutions, and innovation in military education.

NCOs must be exposed to experienced facilitators, who understand how to explain concepts, processes, principles, and procedures to learners, so that they can be applied at the application and synthesis levels. Meaningful feedback to the learner and checking assumptions is essential. This in turn makes learning meaningful and personally relevant to each NCO.

Over the next 2-3 years, an NCOPDS goal will be to reorient NCO PME curriculum, so that fewer MOS specific technical tasks are trained in the resident NCO Advanced Leader Courses and Senior Leader Courses. Training modernization strategies should provide the Army with an adaptive infrastructure that merges virtual, constructive, artificial intelligence and gaming technologies as enablers into a common “synthetic” environment for training and education.<sup>10</sup> This future innovation will make it possible for a greater number of technical skills to be trained and refreshed back at the home station or unit. Curriculum in NCO PME in turn can be rebalanced to focus slightly more on learning about the Army professional ethic, military decision making process, the NCO role in developing subordinates, and building each Soldier’s leadership skills overall.

### **Select, Train, Educate, Promote**

The Army of the future will rely upon a bench of resilient and talented NCOs who are trained and ready. Their competencies (for e.g., agile, adaptive, and innovative) must be built upon a bedrock of training, education, and experience that supports optimized performance.<sup>11</sup> NCOPDS establishment comes out of a realization that maintaining professional standards and certification of skills should remain constant tasks in the daily lives of NCOs serving in the Army. Accordingly, formative training and educational experiences should be executed throughout all phases of the operational cycle (reset, train/ready and available). TRADOC developed the



Select-Train-Educate-Promote (STEP) career training and progression framework as a mechanism to better synchronize NCO PME attendance and to keep the backlog of Soldiers who need school slots to a minimum in the future.

STEP addresses the need for NCOs to achieve professional standards for required training and education experiences prior to moving to the next rank. Unit commanders must also ensure that NCOs attend resident PME when scheduled for a seat assignment by the Army Human Resources Command (HRC). Under STEP Soldiers seeking non-operational deferments from attending school must obtain higher-level chain of command approval. Additionally, Soldiers on the recommended list for promotion who have not completed their respective level of PME, will not be considered fully qualified for promotion.

NCOES will soon include a new Skill Level V Master Leader Course (MLC) for promotable Sergeant First Class to attend prior to pin on to the next rank. Outcomes of the MLC will include building leadership and operational management skills among course graduates. The first course pilot for MLC will take place this summer and resident and non-resident versions of this training will begin to train students in FY17.

"STEP is the foundation upon which the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System stands."

TRADOC Command Sergeant Major  
CSM David S. Davenport, Sr.



# S. T. E. P.

**Selection** for promotion is based on individual performance & potential demonstrated over time.

The culmination of **Training & Education** resulting in certification/ validation that a Soldier is fully qualified in their MOS/ grade.

**Promotion** eligible to next rank upon completing Professional Military Education.

## DESIRED END STATE

Appropriate training, education, and experience is completed before promotion in order to best prepare our NCOs to fight and win in a complex world as adaptive and agile leaders and trusted professionals for force 2025.



Soldier qualified for **Selection:**  
✓ APFT/ Ht&Wt  
✓ Weapons Qual  
✓ MOS Qualified  
✓ SSD Complete  
✓ Demonstrated Character

Soldier participates in **Training:**  
✓ Individual; collective; unit  
✓ MOS specific  
✓ Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills  
✓ Leader Tasks  
✓ Civilian Ed

Soldier attends Professional Military **Education:**  
✓ WLC  
✓ ALC  
✓ SLC  
✓ MLC  
✓ SMC

**Promotion** once Soldier is eligible to pin on (cut-off scores/sequence #).



# EXPERIENCE

Army Profession ★ Professional Competence ★ Team Building ★ Adaptability ★ Lifelong Learning ★ Comprehensive Fitness

## A New Emphasis on Increasing NCO Knowledge & Skills

NCOES of today will remain a subsystem within the NCOPDS of the future. However, the current NCOES processes will undergo several changes. First, as a part of the Army University model, US Army Sergeants Academy will function as the NCOES developer of common core military educational materials. Working in concert with ArmyU will provide the opportunity to innovate programs of instruction and to leverage best practices across the Army's educational institutions.

Second, the complex security environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require that military education for the NCO be more than just a check the block exercise. NCO PME must result in the growth of an individual's professional military knowledge and skills. For example, Army education for NCOs should develop their ability to authenticate sources of information, write and convey messages with accuracy. NCO PME at all levels will soon begin to incorporate short writing assignments and note taking exercises as a normal part of learning activities within courses. Fostering improved writing ability among NCOs will promote mental agility and reflective thinking in general. Moreover, the learning outcomes of PME for NCOs should support greater ability to think strategically.<sup>12</sup>



Third, mandatory training and routine MOS specific tasks are viewed as best addressed and sustained within the unit rather than at schoolhouse under NCOPDS. Because the amount of time available for NCOs to attend PME comes at a premium, non-critical familiarization training should be acquired through mobile learning Apps, online self-development courses, or at home station.

Finally, academic rigor, relevance and challenge will be increased in resident PME courses across the board. Grade point average, class ranking, physical readiness and leadership potential will be evaluated at all levels of NCOES.

### **System Performance Metrics**

NCOPDS will include using data and analysis tools in order to obtain holistic measures of overall system performance. Continual assessment of NCOPDS progress will depend upon access to adequate sources of information using knowledge management tools and databases, such as Army Career Tracker (ACT), TRADOC Strategic Management System (SMS), Training Development Capability (TDC) and Army Training Requirements and Resources System (ATRRS) among others. It's anticipated that by leveraging such existing Army data repositories, the NCOPDS will be able to adjust policies as needed to better align training domain roles and responsibilities, systems, available resources, and goals for future professional development of the NCO cohort. NCOPDS measures of effectiveness and performance will also support ongoing TRADOC Campaign Plan initiatives and major objectives.

### **Summary**

NCOPDS will drive performance optimization for the future NCO Corps. This strategy is being instituted by Army leaders in order to make certain that future NCOs will have the knowledge and skills needed to seize the initiative, use situational-awareness and employ technical skills in a complex operating environment. INCOPD will serve as the TRADOC lead integrator for the NCOPDS to coordinate policies, resourcing, and identifying learning demands associated with professional development of the NCO cohort. Ultimately, NCOPDS will strengthen the NCO Corps as the backbone of the Army, while supporting TRADOC's role to design, build, and develop the Army of tomorrow.

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education, organizational development, and public administration. His research interests are in the areas of educational technologies and human performance optimization.

#### NOTES

1. Headquarters DA Pamphlet 600-25 describes the NCO as an adaptive leader capable of leading, training, and motivating Soldiers.
2. TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 Army Operating Concept states that innovation is vital in organizations that develop capabilities as well as those that train, equip, and sustain forces.
3. G. Pisano, (2015) "You Need an Innovation Strategy," *Harvard Business Review*, (2015): 46. An innovation system must incorporate a coherent set of interdependent processes and structures.
4. Raymond Caldwell, "Systems thinking, Organizational Change and Agency a Practice Theory Critique of Senge's Learning Organization," *Journal of Change Management* 12(2) (Jun 2013), 1-20. The article offers views on the efficacy of learning organizations and the role of systems thinking.
5. RETAL Study 2006 consisted of 3 teams that reviewed developmental needs across officer, noncommissioned officer and civilian cohorts.
6. Army Capstone Concept, TP525-3-0, p. 10.
7. ADRP 3.0. Unified Land Operations. Unified land operations is the Army's contribution to unified action.
8. CSA Marching Orders resulted in Waypoint #2. A key objective is that the Army will remain the most highly trained and professional land force in the world.
9. HQDA EXORD 236-15 was released on 16 July 2015 to support implementation of the NCOPDS. It outlines important changes to NCOES for the future.
10. Army Training and Education Modernization Strategy Pre-Decisional Draft dated 14 April 2014. ATEMS will create a future training environment enabled by the Future Holistic Training Environment Live/Synthetic (FHTE-LS).
11. Army Leader Development Strategy considers training, education, and experience to be the pillars upon which development of Army leaders rests.
12. K.H. Ferguson, "Thinking Matters," *Army Magazine*, 65(3), (2015), 44-46. Article discusses the different purposes of training and education.