

Leaders turn focus toward NCO preparation

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With a new noncommissioned officer career timeline set to roll out in 2015, senior leaders are exploring how the NCO Education System will prepare leaders for the Army of 2020.

The effort responds to Waypoint #1, a mandate from Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno to adapt the leader development of officers and NCOs to meet security challenges of what is expected to be an uncertain and complex strategic environment in the 2020s.

The enlisted side's conceptual effort, NCO 2020, consists of the sergeant major of the Army and a small task force of individuals from Training and Doctrine Command, the Sergeants Major Academy and the human resources and operations staffs of Army headquarters.

In July, Army Secretary John McHugh approved an NCO leader development strategy, to be phased in beginning next year, that tightens the linkage between promotions and military education, and introduces new methods for selecting and preparing soldiers for promotion.

Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond Chandler said the Army must determine how it will prepare soldiers to be the agile and adaptive leaders envisioned in Waypoint #1.

After more than 10 years of war, and a blistering operations tempo that wracked the timing and delivery of training and education programs, Chandler said it's time to assess where the Army is and where it needs to go.

Recent leader development studies have shown that people don't see the value of their institutional training, rather valuing their operational experiences more, Chandler said.

TRADOC is developing a survey for NCOs that will look at who needs training, when they need training, where they will receive training, and how the training will be facilitated by a teacher or instructor, Chandler said.

"We also will be looking at how to rebalance institutional, operational and noninstitutional training," he said.

Because of the operational requirements in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Army reduced the length of NCOES courses in days but increased the number of hours soldiers were in the classroom each day, Chandler said.

"Many educators believe that once a student hits the six-hour point in a classroom, they reach information overload. In the Warrior Leader Course, we were teaching up to 14 hours per day," he said. "We believe instruction at that pace is not something we want to do, because it becomes, 'OK, let's check the block and move on.'"

Addressing ALC backlog

Because of the increased linkage of military education to promotion eligibility, Chandler said, "We are going to look at some possible refinements for 2014 in terms of tightening eligibility for course attendance."

Near-term challenges involve a backlog for the common core phase of the Advanced Leader Course, a requirement for sergeant first class promotion consideration, and throughput at the Warrior Leader Course, a requirement for promotion to staff sergeant.

Under current policy, soldiers in the ranks of private first class through staff sergeant are eligible to attend the Warrior Leader Course provided they meet the prerequisites, such as completion of Structured Self-Development 1.

“Because we have some NCOs who have not attended, we may reduce the eligible population to specialists-promotable, sergeants and staff sergeants,” Chandler said. “Our problem with the Advanced Leader Course is that it has two phases — a technical piece tied to the soldier’s [military occupational specialty] and the common core, which is the leadership portion. We are doing OK with the technical, but we’ve got a big backlog of people who have not completed the common core. Soldiers must complete both phases to be considered an Advanced Leader Course graduate, and be eligible for the sergeant first class board.”

Chandler said to help reduce the backlog for ALC common core; the Army is booking the course for 125 percent fill.

“Even at that, we only are getting 80 percent of those scheduled to attend and complete the course,” Chandler said.

More from the SMA

On other related issues, Chandler said:

“I look at 2014 and I see the chief of staff being fully committed to professional military education and the officer and NCO education systems. I expect [Professional Military Education] will be fully funded, unless some unforeseen financial issue comes up.

“Even if we have full sequestration, I think the Army will make a strong effort to continue to fully fund those PME programs.”

The Army is taking a two-phase approach to preparing NCOs for duty as first sergeants.

“First, within the Senior Leader Course, we have inserted some first sergeant-level tasks so that a person who is going to the SLC will receive training on some first sergeants tasks, as well as platoon sergeant tasks.

“During the past year, we also have instituted a pre-command course for company commanders and first sergeants at locations around the Army. The course has taken most of the items from the old First Sergeant Course and revised and updated the curriculum and tailored the content for the actual installation, where the NCO will be assigned as a first sergeant.”

The Army continues to plan on fielding an online Structured Self-Development Course for sergeants major, to be called SSD-5. However, the timeline for delivery has not been finalized because of technical and packaging problems with the courseware.