

A “Call for Education” In the Military

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“Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education... This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow... And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma... That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: **by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.**”

President Barack Obama, Address to Joint Session of Congress, 24 February 2009

Leading the world politically, economically, and militarily will rely upon America’s investment in education.

Commonly called the “Call for Education”, these excerpts of President Obama’s address to Congress in February show his commitment to education. Leading the world politically, economically, and militarily will rely upon America’s investment in education. The ability to compete globally has become a race of developing the intellectual capacity of the population. In the past, a high school diploma provided the foundation for a successful career—like the enlisted force in the military. Now, almost all careers require additional cognitive and technological skills. Nowhere are these skills more critical than in the military charged with defending this nation. As a military and as a nation, national security and continued development both depend on increasing the education level of the enlisted force.

Historically, the G.I. Bill of 1944 led to the largest economic growth in America’s history and built the foundation of America’s middle class. Ever since, education benefits remain an evolving tool for recruiting and retention for the armed services. However, to date, participation in voluntary education programs has been based on individual initiative more than service necessity.

Traditionally, the success of the enlisted force has been based on vocational expertise, leadership, and management of programs without formal higher education. A culture of “success without education” prevails as an institutional mantra. But now and in the future, the growing careers in the military and nation require an elevated level of cognitive skills. To remain viable, the military needs to complement training with a corresponding level of educational development. The education of service-members helps them individually, develops the military as a learning organization, and supports the economic viability of veterans.

First, additional education supports service-members individually. A person participating in education maintains a mental agility that goes along with lifelong learning. In high school, a student learns basic skills in time management, organization, completion of assignments and commitment to goals. These skills provide a foundation for a productive adult life. However, the cognitive skills that come with additional education include problem solving, logic development, and improved written and oral communication. These proficiencies become the groundwork for future life growth and development. Building this ability to continually integrate new knowledge into life is an important skill no matter which direction life goes—in the military and beyond.

Organizationally, the enlisted force improves in a cradle to grave concept that

incorporates the cognitive development gained through education. It supports recruiting, retention, performance enhancement, and skills for senior enlisted. First, recruiters advertise educational opportunities as a key benefit to serving one’s country. As an example of linking recruitment and educational services, the Army aggressively advertised their completely revamped education program in 2001. By using modern technology, the goArmyEd portal streamlines educational support and eArmyU provides easy access to distance learning courses. Through this, both potential recruits and active service-members see the Army’s commitment to education. In addition to recruitment, participation in college classes has a positive correlation with retention in the military. Research from all services repeatedly shows that retention increases with service-members who utilize these benefits.¹ Furthermore, these more educated service-members are the ideal candidates to retain in military service. Promoting the connection of military service and educational pursuit enhances both recruiting and retention.

The military also directly benefits from the process of educating its service-members. Many educational programs involve practical assignments that apply theoretical concepts to work environments. This reflective thought actively invigorates military projects, processes, and products. As a service-member learns and grows academically, their work performance is enhanced by the

thoughts they are simultaneously developing. In the 2008 White Paper On Learning, the Air Force emphasizes its development as a learning organization—combining training, education, and experience to improve the service.² To illustrate the relative success of the Air Force’s focus on education, the Air Force has led in enrollments and degree completions compared to the other services for the past twenty years.³ The Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) model institutionalizes education within the service by maximizing training credits in support of an accredited associate’s degree. As of March 2009, 24% of Air Force enlisted personnel had an associate’s degree or higher.⁴ With almost a quarter of the enlisted personnel educated, the Air Force benefits from these additional skills while the individual is still on active duty.

In addition to recruiting, retention, and enhanced performance, an associate’s degree should be an educational pre-requisite for E-7 and above. While service-members E-1 to E-6 work toward an educational goal, E-7 and above will benefit most from these skills in performing their duties. By including an education milestone as part of career progression, the military shows their commitment to education. Only the Navy has attempted an enlisted education requirement policy. In August 2005, the Navy mandated a rate-related associate’s degree for promotion to E-8.⁵ The bold initiative attempted to formally integrate education into enlisted career progression. Unfortunately, this policy contradicted the enlisted culture of “success without education” and was rescinded in July 2007.⁶ But the culture of yesterday does not support the competitive skills needed for the culture of tomorrow to be successful. As the need for education is increasingly recognized, the services are

beginning to emphasize education as a factor in selecting senior enlisted personnel. Even though it is not an official requirement, the military is reaching a tipping point in formally recognizing the need to educate the enlisted force.

Finally, education does not just help the individual and the military; it also supports veterans after leaving the service. The majority of veterans who separate or retire from the military service will continue on to post-military employment in America’s workforce. For the same reason the G.I. Bill was introduced over sixty years ago, educated service-members can become a valuable asset to America’s economy. Today, veterans also have difficulty finding jobs and translating military experience into a civilian credentials. Combining military training with formal education for a degree ultimately eases this transition and legitimizes credentials. In addition, research has shown that higher education in general contributes to increased employability, higher earnings, and higher self-esteem.⁷ For all of these reasons, educating veterans prior to leaving the service gives them the foundation for the military-to-civilian lifestyle change.

In conclusion, the military needs its own “call for education”. As President Obama said, the jobs of the future need more than a high school diploma and the “call” is meant as a challenge to all Americans. This includes the military. The time has come to break the “success without education” culture and mandate education for senior enlisted. Higher education needs to be actively integrated in a cradle to grave concept so the military can benefit from every step of academic development. The commitment to educating the enlisted force needs to happen today in order to compete tomorrow—to

reach recruits, to win wars, and to build the economy. America’s future national security depends on fulfilling the promise of education to her service-members.

About the Author:



Lieutenant Commander Andrea H. Cameron received her commission through NROTC at Marquette University. As a Surface Warfare Officer, LCDR Cameron completed tours onboard USS Saipan (LHA 2), USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71), and the Expeditionary Warfare Training Group, Atlantic. At the end of these tours, she laterally transferred to the Human Resources community. In the new community, she held the positions of Executive Assistant/Admin Officer at NAS Fallon and Training Officer onboard USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74). LCDR Cameron also volunteered for an individual augmentation on an Embedded Training Team for the Afghanistan National Army. Over her career, LCDR Cameron has participated in Operation Noble Anvil/Allied Force in Kosovo, Operation Southern Watch, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

LCDR Cameron holds a Bachelor degree in Political Science, a Masters degree in Human Resource Development from The George Washington University, and a Masters degree in Military Operational Art and Science from the Air Command and Staff College. She is also completing a dissertation for a Doctorate in Educational Technology at Pepperdine University. LCDR Cameron is qualified as a Surface Warfare Officer, Master Training Specialist, and Senior Professional of Human Resources (SPHR). She is currently stationed at the Naval War College.

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1 Military research supports retention. Barnard, Douglas and Zardeskas, Elizabeth, “Voluntary Education of Enlisted Service Members: An Analysis of Program Effects on Retention and Other Outcome Measures,” (Masters Thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, 2007). Sticha, P. J., Dall, T. A., Handy, K., Espinosa, J., Hogan, P. F., & Young, M. C., Impact of the Army Continuing Education System (ACES) on Soldier Retention and Performance: Data Analysis (U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, June 2003). Garcia, Federico and Joy, Ernest, Effectiveness of the Voluntary Education Program (Center for Naval Analysis, April 1998).

2 General William Looney, Air Force Document 080130-066, On Learning: The Future of Air Force Education and Training, 30 January 2008.

3 Cameron, Andrea. “An Evaluation of Navy Voluntary Education” (Thesis, Air Command and Staff College, 2009).

4 Air Force Personnel Center.

5 Navy Message NAVADMIN 203/05, Senior Enlisted Initiative-Associates Degree for E8 Eligibility for Fiscal Year 2011 Selection Board, 19 August 2005.

6 Navy Message NAVADMIN 150/07, Senior Enlisted Education Policy, 08 June 2007.

7 PACESETTER, Volume 27, Summer 2004. <http://www.pacer.org/tatra/resources/postsec.ed.asp>