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## CGSOC at a Distance

By David Pierson

When most people think about the Command and General Staff Officer's Course (CGSOC), they think of the 10-month resident course conducted at Fort Leavenworth. During their ten months in the course, mid-level Army Officers participate in a Common Core course, Advanced Operations Course, and elective courses alongside sister service and international officers. The Common Core portion of the course addresses the Joint Professional Military Educational (JPME) Phase I requirements for Intermediate Level Education (ILE).<sup>1</sup> However, in order to be JPME Level I and Military Educational Level (MEL) 4 complete, Army officers must also complete an approved Branch or Functional Area credentialing course.<sup>2</sup> The Advanced Operations Course (AOC) is the required credentialing course for CGSOC resident course officers. AOC "prepares Maneuver, Fires & Effects and Force Sustainment career field officers to serve on battle staffs of operational level headquarters, to lead missions assigned to battalion and brigade-size units, and to develop the professional skills and competencies they will require as senior field-grade leaders."<sup>3</sup> Finally, the electives program allows students to enhance their personal and professional development through specialized courses. Not only can students enroll in skill identifier-producing programs, they can also pursue a Master of Military Art and Science (MMAS) degree as part of the electives program. During their time at Fort Leavenworth, resident CGSOC students hone their skills and develop relationships to make them agile and adaptive leaders prepared to lead military forces in many different operating environments. Each year approximately 1200 students graduate from the resident course.

There is another, less understood version of CGSOC, the non-resident distance-learning version of CGSOC. The distance-learning component of CGSOC has approximately 7000 officers enrolled in the course at any one time and graduates approximately 1000 officers per year. The distance-learning version of CGSOC meets the same JPME I / MEL 4 requirements as the resident course, educates many more officers than its resident counterpart, yet is little understood by the Army community. Numerous myths and misconceptions surround the distance-learning version of CGSOC including its components, demographics, format, and credentials. A quick comparison of the two will dispel some of these.

The non-resident distance-education version of CGSOC consists of two components, the Common Core course and the Advanced Operations Course. It currently does not include the elective course program offered in the resident version of CGSOC or the associated ability to obtain an MMAS degree. The Common Core portion can be completed in three different manners. The Common Core course is taught in three phases as part of The Army School System (TASS) "M" course. This non-resident version of CGSC is intended for reserve officers and is delivered in three separate phases over a 12-16 month period.

During Phase I, officers receive in-classroom CGSOC instruction in a two-week active duty for training (ADT) period. Phase II, which lasts for eight months, is taught on weekends or evenings as part of inactive for duty training. Phase III is another two-week ADT phase.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 1,200 officers each year complete Common Core through the "M" course, receiving the same curriculum found in the resident Common Core. The most prevalent way that officers receive the non-resident Common Core course is through the "S" course. This self-paced course is administered in three phases over an 18-month period. The course is entirely asynchronous and has no classroom instruction or physical attendance requirements. Instead, students are assigned to faculty advisors who coach and mentor them through the web-based course. Approximately 2400 officers complete the "S" course each year.



There is one other way to attend the Common Core course that is considered a variant of resident CGSOC. Like the resident course, through a merit-based selection process officers are selected to attend the satellite campus Common Core course. This course lasts 14 weeks and is taught at four satellite campus locations: Fort Belvoir, Fort Gordon, Redstone Arsenal, and Fort Lee. This course is designed for Functional Area officers who will complete their credentialing program before or after their attendance at Common Core.<sup>5</sup> This version of Common Core is linked to non-resident distance learning CGSOC because there are some Basic Branch officers who attend the satellite Common Core course and then complete CGSOC through the distance-learning version of the Advanced Operations Course.

While there are three different ways for distance-education officers to complete Common Core, there is only one version of the non-resident, distance-education CGSOC Advanced Operations Course (AOC). In this blended learning 12-month course, students are organized into 16-person staff groups, called cohorts. Each cohort follows a paced schedule consisting of both individual lessons and synchronous group exercises. This course closely mirrors the resident curriculum with some modifications to conform to a distance-learning modality. The synchronous portions of the course are conducted through web-conferencing applications that enable students and instructors to interact. Once students successfully complete AOC they are CGSOC graduates receiving the CGSOC diploma and JPME I / MEL 4 qualification. Each year approximately 1000 officers complete the distance education version of CGSOC AOC.

Aside from differences in curriculum components, resident CGSOC also differs significantly from non-resident CGSOC in the demographics of the attending officers. One of the major differences in student populations, which can lead to negative opinions about non-resident CGSOC, is how students are seated in the course. Attendance at resident CGSOC is merit-based with slightly over fifty percent of Active Component officers selected to attend the resident course. A very small number of Reserve Component officers are selected to attend the resident course as well. The remaining Active Component officers, not selected for the resident course, work with Human Resources Command to obtain seat reservations in non-resident CGSOC. This have and have-not dichotomy in the Active Component can lead to the view that the non-resident course is not as good. While non-resident CGSOC may not be as desirable to Active Component officers as the resident course, this viewpoint has no impact on the quality of the course. Additionally, Active Component officers represent only a small percentage of the non-resident course, which is focused primarily on educating Reserve Component officers. While there is a merit-based standard employed in seating resident CGSOC classes, this standard does not affect the conduct or quality of the non-resident course.

The composition of student work groups is different between resident and non-resident CGSOC. Within the resident course staff groups, referred to as seminars in the Joint Officer Professional Military Education Policy, there is a requirement for both sea service and Air Force representation.<sup>6</sup> Additionally each staff group has an international officer and usually a reserve component Army officer. There is also the potential to have an interagency student in a staff group. Thus each staff group is composed of approximately 75% Active Component officers with the rest of the students being sister service, international, Reserve Component, or interagency.

The mix of officers in nonresident CGSOC cohorts is much different from that found in the resident classroom. There is no requirement for other service representation. Occasionally a sister service, international or interagency student will participate in the nonresident course, but this is by exception. Nonresident CGSOC is the primary way that Reserve Component officers attend the course. However, there are no set quotas for Active Component or Reserve Component officers within the course. Cohorts have no set ratios for officer composition, but nonresident CGSOC student attendance is typically 20% Regular Army, 55% National Guard, and 25% Army Reserve.

As alluded to earlier, the delivery formats for curricula are very different between resident CGSC and non-resident CGSOC. A vast majority of the curriculum is delivered face-to-face in the classroom at resident CGSOC,



with a small portion imparted via web-based learning using the Blackboard learning management system. Non-resident CGSOC uses a blended approach that includes face-to-face instruction, web-based asynchronous instruction, and web-based synchronous facilitation. Common Core “M” course instruction through instructors at TASS units uses face-to-face instruction during two annual training periods as well as nights and weekends to deliver the CGSOC curriculum. In this manner it is very much like the resident Common Core course, but on a different schedule. The Common Core “S” course exclusively uses web-based asynchronous instruction via the Blackboard learning management system. This instruction consists of interactive media instruction combining video, text, and graphics. Blackboard is the virtual classroom, not only containing readings and instruction, but also announcements, assignments, tests, and gradebooks.

Distance-learning CGSOC AOC employs a blended approach using both web-based Blackboard instruction and synchronous web-conferencing. In this format a cohort of sixteen students progresses through the course together over a 12-month period using Blackboard to receive computer-based instruction, conduct tests, and turn-in assignments. Operating from remote locations throughout the world, AOC distance-learning students collaborate and apply their lessons synchronously using web-conferencing applications.

A common view is that the quality of education in non-resident CGSOC is less due to the lack of face-to-face coordination with teachers and fellow students. Additionally, many feel that the online modality cannot impart the learning objectives of the course as well as the face-to-face classroom environment. While nonresident students lose some of the efficiencies gained by being in close proximity to other students, they gain a valuable skill in being able to integrate and plan from remote locations using information technology. Like their resident counterparts, the non-resident CGSOC students are adult learners who are self-directed and motivated to learn in order to increase their ability to cope with real-life tasks.<sup>7</sup>

Their success in learning is determined by their intrinsic motivation, not by the learning modality. Despite a genuine student desire to learn, many question the effectiveness of distance education. The efficacy of distance education has been the topic of countless studies over the past two decades and the resounding conclusion to these studies is that there are “no significant differences in the learning outcomes achieved by students engaged in face-to-face instruction compared to those participating in distance education.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, through a combination of different formats, nonresident CGSOC students, who are all adult learners, conduct blended learning to meet the course objectives.

Although the curriculum components, class demographics, and delivery modalities may differ between resident and nonresident CGSOC programs, the outcomes are the same. Whether resident or nonresident, CGSOC graduates all receive an education that meets the same standards-based JPME learning objectives. Resident course students will gain more experience in personally working with officers from different services and nations, while nonresident students will gain valuable experience in integrating planning from remote locations. In the end they all receive the same diploma and the same JPME I / MEL 4 qualification. They reach the same destination via different paths.

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## NOTES

1. Armed Forces, 10 U.S.C. § 2151-2155, October 28, 2004, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/2151>.
2. Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 19 August 2014), 3-37.
3. CGSC Circular 350-1, *U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Catalog* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, January 2016), 7-11.
4. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), *Non-Resident Intermediate Level Education (ILE) Self-Study* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 17 September 2007), 3-4.
5. AR 350-1, 3-37.
6. CJCSI 1800.01D, Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP), (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 5 September 2012), B1 – B2.
7. Malcom S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 7th ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).
8. Randy Best, *Research on the Effectiveness of Online Learning: A Compilation of Research on the Online Learning* (Dallas, TX: Academic Partnerships, 2011), 1.