

# **How Army Officers Attending the Command and General Staff Officers Course Decide Whether or Not to Pursue a Master's Degree: Factors that Impact Their Decision and Unexpected Themes that Emerged**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative case study explored how Army officers attending the Command and General Staff Officers Course (CGSOC) decided whether or not to attend graduate school. CGSC students were interviewed and their own narratives described how they made their decisions.

## **Overview**

From 2011 to 2012, a study was conducted at Fort Leavenworth to explore how U.S. Army officers attending the Command and General Staff Officers Course (CGSOC) decide whether to also enroll in a master's degree program. Many officers who do not have a master's degree look at their time at CGSOC as an opportunity to earn one. This paper provides an overview of the results of that study.

## **Background**

The U.S. Army has begun to recognize that many of the intellectual and cognitive skills officers need result from advanced civilian education opportunities, such as graduate school (Petraeus, 2007). Senior leaders have begun to increase the emphasis on advanced degrees as part of officers' career development.

Approximately 65% of lieutenant colonels on active duty in the U.S. Army have a master's degree (DMDC, 2012); for majors, the percentage is 36% (DMDC, 2011). From interviews with students, their perception is that a master's degree is an "unofficial requirement" for selection to lieutenant colonel. Majors see their commanders and senior officers with master's degrees, and believe they are expected as part of their professional development.

## **The Research Question**

The study was guided by the following research question: How do U.S. Army officers attending the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officers Course decide whether or not to attend graduate school? Subordinate questions were:

1. Do *military career requirements* influence a CGSOC student's decision to attend graduate school? If so, how do they influence the decision? If not, why not?
2. Do *post-military career aspirations and requirements* play a role in a CGSOC student's decision to attend graduate school? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. Do *family considerations* influence a CGSOC student's decision to attend graduate school? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. Does *previous academic experience* influence a CGSOC student's decision to attend graduate school? If so, how? If not, why not?

A total of 26 officers were interviewed, 12 who decided to attend one of the graduate programs available to CGSC students or were already in a master's degree program, and 14 who elected *not* to attend any of the graduate programs offered. Analysis of the interviews suggests

that military career requirements, post-military career aspirations and requirements, family considerations, and previous academic experience all influenced students' decisions to pursue a master's degree while attending CGSOC. In addition, seven themes that were common to many of the participants unexpectedly revealed themselves in the interviews. Those themes were: 1) self-efficacy and confidence, 2) goal setting and achievement 3) persistence, 4) time management and operational tempo, 5) life issues, 6) quality of degree, and 7) guidance and mentorship.

The theme of *self-efficacy and confidence* was the sense expressed by students that they would be successful if they enrolled. *Goal setting and achievement* was described as the students setting goals for themselves and working to achieve them. *Persistence* was a sense of continuing to try, to not give up, and to work through whatever challenges present themselves. *Time management and operational tempo* was defined as being able to allocate time in one's life to pursue a master's degree. *Operational tempo* was closely linked to *time management* and was described as time away from home on deployment, time away from home due to long workdays, and the academic workload. *Life issues* were the complications that sometimes intrude on an individual's plans for personal, professional, and academic achievement. *Guidance and mentorship* was a theme that emerged in two different directions: students either received clear guidance or they received little or none at all. *Quality of the master's degree* was a theme expressed both by students enrolled in graduate school and those who were not. Students said they felt they needed *any* master's degree in their official record to keep pace with their peers. Of less importance was where it was from, the field of study, or the reputation of the degree.

### **The Study**

Individual interviews were conducted in a private setting. The interview protocol was based on interviews with directors of three of the graduate school programs available to CGSOC students and with six faculty members who advise students. "Corroborating evidence from different sources" was expected to help "shed light" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208) on the research questions.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify appropriate study participants who met the selection criteria and were best able to answer the research question (Creswell, 2009). Participants came from a sample of 257 students who indicated in an on-line survey whether they were enrolled in graduate school and willing to meet to be interviewed.

Interviews were tape recorded (audio only) and transcribed by the researcher. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts of the interviews were member checked for "accuracy and palatability" by the participants (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Participants were allowed to add to the transcribed interviews or "to provide alternative language or interpretation" (Stake, 1995, p. 115) in order to more fully describe how they made their decision. A sample of the interviews were peer reviewed.

### **The Students**

The students who participated in the study describe a range of differences with respect to their social, economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Some are first generation college graduates, while others' families have advanced degrees. Some parents had high school diplomas, some had doctorates, and one grandmother had recently received her bachelor's degree.

### **The Research Questions**

#### **Military Career Requirements**

Most of the CGSC students interviewed said that military career requirements influenced their decision whether or not to attend graduate school (22/26). They saw a graduate degree as an unwritten and unstated requirement. For some, improving their professional credentials was the key consideration; for others, whatever they could do to remain on active duty was the prime motivator. Differences between what students perceived as important to their future success in the Army, what their leaders and mentors told them was important, and the conflicting advice of their personnel managers made their decision more difficult. Even those who chose not to pursue a master's degree said they were only postponing it until later in their careers.

### **Post Military Career Aspirations and Requirements**

Post-military career aspirations and requirements played a role in some students' decision, but not all (16/26). One student did not have a very clear idea of what he wanted to do after leaving the Army, but thought a master's degree would help make him more competitive in the civilian job market. Not everyone said they thought a graduate degree was an automatic ticket to financial success, but those who addressed their plans after leaving the Army agreed that it was a necessary component for their future employment security and would improve their employability in a future civilian job market. For CGSC students not enrolled in graduate school who already had a master's degree, it had more value to their present military career than after leaving the service.

### **Family Considerations**

Family considerations influenced most students' decision with respect to enrolling in a master's degree program (20/26). The influence emanated from two sources: immediate family (spouse and children) and extended family (parents, siblings, and other relatives). For some officers, the added stress on the family associated with graduate school, coupled with a desire to reconnect with spouse and children after long periods of separation due to deployments and high operational tempo, made family considerations the overriding criteria. For others, the impact of pursuing a master's degree on the family was considered, but the sacrifice was deemed worth the payoff in terms of improvement in career security and keeping pace with contemporaries. Several officers said the academic achievements of family members served as both an inspiration and, in many cases, as a source of encouragement. Only one student said family considerations did not influence her decision. Barbara said she never "gave thought to how much the schooling would really impact" her life; she "was more focused on the benefits after graduation."

### **Previous Academic Experience**

Research shows that adults' previous experience in learning activities can influence their decision to participate in future learning activities, and interviews with CGSOC students support this (Cross, 1981). Students who had a positive undergraduate experience expressed a more positive view of graduate school and a greater sense of efficacy with respect to pursuing a master's degree. Prior *graduate school experience*, whether it resulted in a degree or an occasional graduate course, was also a positive influence on their decision about graduate school. Even though some students described challenges in their previous academic endeavors, they were determined to succeed now. In other cases, students said that despite a positive undergraduate experience, it did not influence their decision—so the findings trend in both directions.

## Themes

### **Self-efficacy/confidence**

Self-efficacy and confidence are defined as the sense expressed by CGSOC students that they would be successful if they enrolled. If they chose *not* to enroll, it was not because they feared failing, but for other reasons. Most (20/26) were confident they could successfully complete a master's degree program. Some went so far as to state outright that they *never had a doubt* that they would be successful, even when they described struggling with external factors such as time, money, professional conflicts, and so forth. In addition, many said that if they began a master's program, they were not going to quit until they had succeeded; there was no question of not completing the program once begun. There was also a thread of "seeking out new experiences" (Cross, 1981) that ran through many of the respondents' narratives.

### **Goal Setting and Achievement**

Goal setting and achievement is described by CGSC students in the study in several ways, but the common denominator was that almost all participants in the research set goals for themselves and worked to achieve them (20/26). As a group, the CGSC students interviewed were consistently motivated, set realistic but high goals for themselves, and in nearly all instances achieved those goals, although in some cases not the first time. The goals they set for themselves may differ, and the importance they assign to those goals may differ, but nearly all took a similar approach to setting and achieving goals.

### **Persistence**

Persistence is defined as a sense of continuing to try, to never give up, and to work through whatever challenges the CGSC students are encountered. Those who experienced challenges told stories of how difficult it was for them in terms of academic ability, family support, or lack of guidance from senior leaders or mentors, and communicated a sense that quitting was not an option. Persistence in some form was expressed by many students (10/26). Some said they were going to earn a master's degree regardless of how hard it was going to be or what sacrifices they had to make. In fact, all officers in a master's degree program graduated in June, except for one.

### **Time Management and Operational Tempo**

Time management is defined as the ability to allocate time in one's life to pursue a master's degree, or finding that "margin of power" as McClusky described it (1963). Time management overlaps with operational tempo because some individuals participating in the study found it easy to balance their personal, professional, and academic requirements and still find time for graduate school, whereas others found it exceedingly difficult. This theme also overlaps with family considerations with respect to allocating time and attention between work (operational tempo), family, and academics. The challenge of managing available time to pursue a master's degree, coupled with a very high operational tempo, were common observations made by students (14/26).

### **Life Issues**

Life issues are defined as the complications of adult life that sometimes intrude on an individual's academic plan, and include the broader category of quality of life issues. Some students described significant emotional events in their lives that influenced their graduate school decision. Others shared the regret they had about not pursuing a master's degree sooner, or getting the wrong one, or one that does not have a "good reputation." Troubled children, marital

strife, or elderly parents were all factors cited by students that mitigated against pursuing a master's degree. Quality of life, in particular for students who had extensive operational deployments, was an issue for many students (12/26), but was expressed more often by those who decided *not* to enroll in graduate school.

### **Guidance and Mentorship**

Guidance and mentorship was a theme that emerged during the interviews in two different directions. Students said they either received clear guidance about pursuing a master's degree while attending CGSOC or they received no guidance at all (14/26). Some sought out and received advice from their senior leadership, mentors, or colleagues, while others either did not seek any advice or found that the advice they received was not particularly helpful. If they received any guidance, it was to earn a master's degree while at CGSC; no one they should *not* pursue a master's degree except their personnel managers, who recommended they focus on doing well in CGSOC.

### **Quality of Degree**

Concern over the quality of the master's degree earned was expressed both by students who were enrolled in graduate school and those who were not (8/26), although it was not a prevalent concern. Some students enrolled to earn a second master's degree program because they were dissatisfied with what they perceived as the low quality of their first; they wanted a graduate degree that had name recognition, not just one they had earned to "check the box." They regretted not earning a master's degree they wanted in terms of the university from where they earned it and the area of study. They wanted one from a university that had greater name recognition or prestige in their chosen field of study. The *number* of graduate degrees was a factor for some students: more is better. Related to this was the perception that "two is the new one;" since virtually all lieutenant colonels have advanced degrees, in order to set oneself apart from the rest of the group it is advantageous to have more than one master's degree.

### **Conclusion**

An examination of the research findings necessitates an understanding of the professional, social, and academic environment in which newly arrived officers find themselves. In virtually all instances, CGSOC students have arrived at Fort Leavenworth from high-stress, fast-paced operational assignments. They struggle to adapt to an academic, rather than operational, environment, a very different context than they are accustomed to and one which they may not have experienced for over a decade. All of these stressors mitigate against enrolling in graduate school.

How difficult CGSOC academics will be, how much time will be available to pursue graduate school, how much time family activities will entail, and so forth, is largely unknown when incoming officers are presented with the opportunity to enroll in one of the many graduate school programs available to them during the 10-month academic year. They have not met their faculty advisors, the other members of their staff group, or been given much insight on what they to expect in the next ten months. Students with high confidence and ability may elect to enroll in a master's program and find success, while others with less ability may enroll in a master's program, perhaps feeling that they do not want to miss the opportunity, and soon find themselves overwhelmed with two major sets of academic requirements. Some feel the pressure of their peers—"everyone else was enrolling, and they didn't look any smarter than me"—and sign up for a master's degree program with little consideration of what that would eventually entail.

CGSC faculty advisors said they wished they could advise their students before they made a decision about graduate school, but in most cases, students have already made their decision before the first class meeting in a master's degree program. Many instructors have had students in previous years who enrolled in a master's program, and know how much work it involves. They could provide a perspective on graduate school—what was it like for them, how much work it will involve, and how much it will impact on the CGSOC academic requirements.

Significantly, nearly all the students interviewed who were *not* enrolled in a master's degree program already had a master's degree (10 out of 14). Some of them expressed relief that they had already achieved that goal, particularly after witnessing their classmates' challenges. No one said they thought their classmates found it easy to be in both CGSOC and graduate school at the same time. However, many also said that despite the additional work, and the challenges their classmates experienced, they would have tried to earn a master's degree if they did not already have one. This perspective indicates the importance students attribute to a master's.

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