

Distance Education and the Operational Commander How Much is too Much?

Abstract:

Distance education is a force multiplier. The capability to deliver educational curriculum to large numbers of students over great distances has become critical to the success of the modern military force. Advances in technology now enable countries to maintain instant connectivity with their security forces deployed to the far corners of the earth – many deployed in support of international peace keeping and peace enforcement operations. The challenge of distance and geography however has not reduced the critical requirement to provide training and educational programs to security forces located far from the institutions responsible for force education and training. Distance education programs support professional development, ensure timely promotions, reduce curriculum delivery costs, and increase the number of student graduates. While the benefits of distance education are many, particularly to the resource or logistically constrained, recent experience by operational commanders indicate there might be a point at which distance education programs become less effective and where inefficiencies begin to override the benefits. The question becomes whether or not the benefits of a robust distance education program outweigh the many tangible and intangible benefits of a more conventional school-house classroom scenario. Are there certain educational programs best served in the school-house setting? Can distance education programs contribute to a reduced state of operational readiness? While much of the evidence remains anecdotal, sufficient feedback from some distance education programs indicate the answer might be yes. It is important for militaries, which increasingly rely on distance education for curriculum delivery to consider both the good and the bad as they plan future program delivery methods. We will explore not only the benefits of distance education to the operational commander but also the potential downside of this very important program.

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