

Explaining Educational Benefits: A Leader's Responsibility

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Let me start by stating I was not a perfect company commander; such a person does not exist. However, a strong point of my command was talking with Soldiers and discussing the educational opportunities and benefits they could use while serving besides the GI Bill. What always amazed me was the lack of information that Soldiers received from previous leadership. Too often Soldiers either never received information about benefits such as tuition assistance or had no idea about the requirements and tools to access it. When I mention Soldiers, I am not only referring to junior Soldiers but also senior NCOs and junior officers. Regardless of rank or time in service, three commonalities remained: a lack of knowledge on benefits such as tuition assistance (TA) and credentialing assistance (CA), little to no knowledge on schools that offer discounted tuition for active military, and a lack of knowledge on how to setup and request these benefits.

While many who read this will insist that these responsibilities belong to the education center, that simply is not true. With the high operations tempo found in most brigade combat teams, it is often difficult for Soldiers to sit down with an education counselor. There must be another method for Soldiers to get this information. Hence the importance that military leaders especially at the platoon level and higher be able to explain educational benefits. So how can this be done? I am glad you asked.

When it comes to explaining benefits such as TA and CA to Soldiers, leaders first need to educate themselves on what these benefits are. Tuition assistance is a resource for any Soldier who has completed basic training and advanced individual training as well as officers who have completed the basic officer leaders course (BOLC). Once eligible, Soldiers who have not yet earned an undergraduate degree are able to receive \$250 per credit hour for 16 credit hours per fiscal year up to 130 credit hours total.¹ For Soldiers and officers who enter the military with an undergraduate degree, they are able to use TA to obtain a graduate degree. The Army allots funding for 39 credit hours also at a rate of \$250 per credit hour limited to 16 credit hours per fiscal year.² It is also important to inform junior officers that if they use TA they will incur a two-year active duty service obligation (ADSO) starting from the completion date of the last class in which TA was used. For example, I used TA when pursuing my graduate degree and completed my last course in December of 2019; my ADSO required me to continuing serving in the military until at least December of 2021.

Credentialing assistance is a newer benefit that allows Soldiers to pursue certifications and credentials that can be MOS related or a personal interest. Currently, the Army offers more than 1,600 different credentials for Soldiers to pursue. These credentials generally cover any subject a person can think of from computer science to project management. CA also allows Soldiers to pursue multiple credentials a year, providing up to \$4,000 per fiscal year in funding through approved providers.³ It is important to note that CA and TA use the same pot of money. That means if I use \$1,000 for credentialing assistance then I only have \$3,000 for tuition assistance and vice versa. For leaders, it is imperative that we discuss credentialing options with Soldiers and know what they are interested in. Too often as leaders, we push college on Soldiers who generally are not interested in the concept. We need to push the pursuit of credentials with the same fervor we push college; and like giving dairy to someone who is lactose intolerant, if we force college as the only option for Soldiers, it could end in disaster. A great tool for leaders to use with Soldiers is the Army Credentialing Opportunities On-line (COOL) website (<https://cool.osd.mil/army>). This website allows Soldiers to view the full library of available credentials and the steps to applying for CA.

Once leaders are competent on what TA and CA are, the next step is making the time to sit down with subordinates and explain this information. Now there are several ways to convey this, but I will share the two methods that worked best for me. The first is making the most of quarterly counseling. While some leaders may see this as a "check-the-box" requirement, it is a key event to ensuring the personal development of subordinates. While

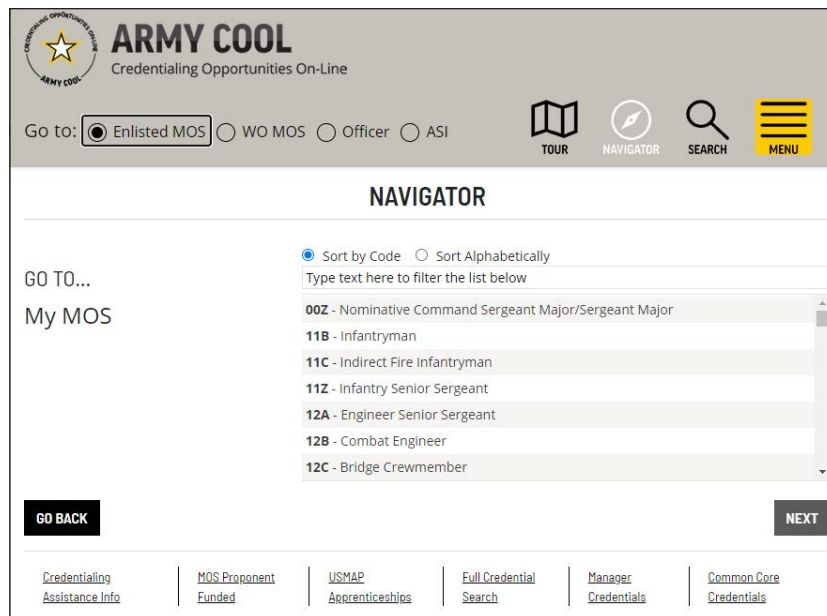


Figure 1 — Army Credentialing Opportunities On-Line Website

discussing a Soldier’s performance over the last quarter, it is also important to listen to their goals for self-development moving forward. When I conducted my first quarterly counseling with my platoon leaders, I would ask if they wanted to pursue a credential or graduate degree. If they did, I would ask what type of credential/degree, the reason for pursuing it, their timeline for completion, and if they were willing to pay anything out of pocket.

Each aspect played a key role in the recommendation I would give. For example, the type of credential or degree could affect the type of university I would recommend. For my Soldiers who wanted to pursue things like a degree in cyber security, I would often recommend universities that were a member of the National Security Agency’s (NSA) National Center for Academic Excellence.⁴ If they had a timeline for completion, I would sit down with them and discuss what their course load would look like. Many were often ambitious and wanted to complete their degree in one to two years. However, once we laid out how many courses that would be per semester, we often would adjust after considering both professional and important personal life events (field exercises, promotions, permanent changes of station, weddings, and childbirths).

A very important aspect for assisting Soldiers is understanding the reason why Soldiers want to pursue a degree or credential. Is it for personal growth? Is it for professional growth, or is it to assist the Soldier before transitioning to the civilian workforce? The Soldier’s answer greatly impacted my response. Many of my NCOs wanted to pursue a degree to assist with career advancement. This meant creating a very strict timeline and looking for universities that would give the most credit for the NCO’s joint service transcript (JST) or utilize universities that allow students to demonstrate their current knowledge using competency-based evaluations. These considerations were critical to ensuring they could complete the degree and have it added to their enlisted records brief (ERB) prior to the next promotion board.

The other method that worked for me in explaining educational benefits to Soldiers was bringing a representative from the education center to our formation. Using the People First Initiative, I would invite a representative to speak to my company on the last Friday of the month before or during the closeout formation. This method was a huge success; the representative was able to answer Soldiers’ questions on the spot and provide information on universities that had partnered with the installation and offered classes on post. The representative would also discuss trends in the use of TA and CA. Leaders and Soldiers could continue receiving information on educational benefits by requesting access to the education center’s email distribution. This enabled leaders to continue updating Soldiers on educational opportunities and provide updates to any changes to TA and CA requirements.

One of the hardest parts of informing Soldiers about educational benefits is talking about the cost. Most Soldiers do not have the experience to differentiate between schools that are looking to provide a worthwhile education that sets them up for success verses those that prey on Soldiers’ lack of experience and purely see their tuition

assistance as a quick cash grab. Herein lies the leader's task; it is tedious and painstaking but well worth the effort. As leaders, we must sit with Soldiers and assist in the groundwork.

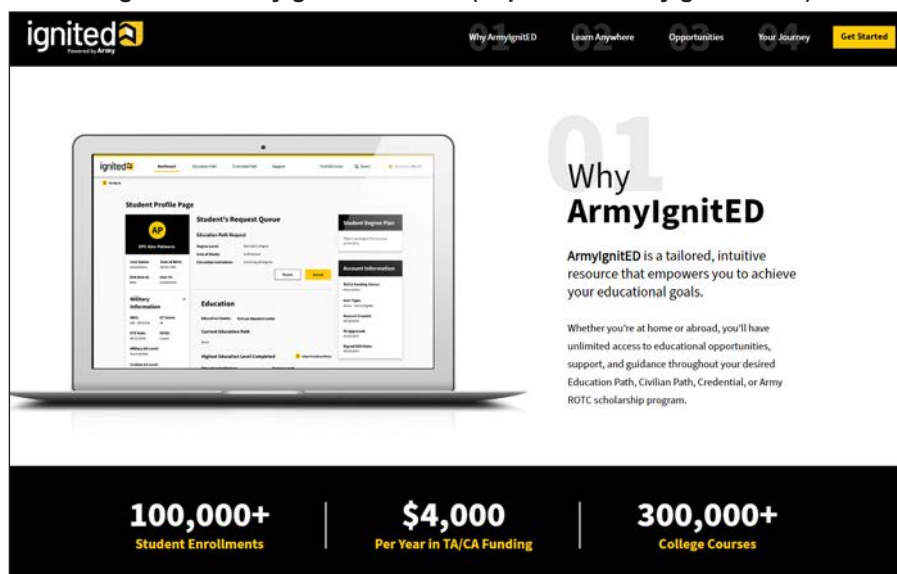
I cannot count the number of times Soldiers came up to me and said they found a college that offered the degree they wanted and only cost the price of TA. However, once we sat down and investigated the institution, they were often unaccredited or accredited by an agency that would make it near impossible to transfer earned credits to another university. The best way to explain this process for a leader is to compare it to taking a teenager to a used car dealership. Every place is different, and they do not all sell the same level of quality. It is vital to make the time and assist Soldiers through the process. Do the initial Google search with Soldiers and find colleges that will only cost what the Soldier is willing to pay. When I would sit with Soldiers, I would ask how much they were willing to pay. For myself, my thought process was: "You can have my time or you can have my money, but I'm not giving you both." When I would look at a university, I would see if they offered a tuition discount for military. I specifically looked for universities that limited the cost of attendance to the Army's TA rate. If they did, I would do a "look under the hood." I would ensure that there were not additional fees, that the tuition would not change dependent on the Soldier's state of residency and who they are accredited by, and whether the university is regionally or nationally accredited (in this case regional accreditation being the better of the two).

It is especially important to differentiate between schools that label themselves as military friendly and those that are actually cost effective. Just because a school has a veteran's office and hosts veteran events does not mean it has any sort of tuition discount for veterans or those currently serving. They may accept the GI Bill and have a yellow ribbon program, but that does not mean there are any benefits for those using tuition assistance.

The last item to mention is that leaders should assist Soldiers with setting up their TA and CA accounts. The first step is to guide them to the Army's official education assistance website — www.armyignited.com. For those who share the battle scars of using GoArmyEd, the ArmyIgnitED website is much easier to access and user friendly. Starting at the login page, ArmyIgnitED breaks the process into five easy steps.⁵ After Soldiers create their user profile, they will do a search for a degree they want to pursue. Then they will create their education path, deciding when and how many courses to take each semester (this is where sitting down with Soldiers ahead of time and considering important events pays off). Once that is complete, they apply for classes and request tuition assistance to either pay for the class completely or are prepared to pay a portion of the cost. Soldiers will attend their classes either online or in-person and then earn their degree after meeting the necessary requirements.

The credentialing assistance on ArmyIgnitED uses the same account as tuition assistance. The main difference is that once Soldiers login they will request CA instead of tuition. Afterwards, they will request to add a credential for funding. They can either search the list of available credentials or type in the name of the credential they want. Once Soldiers have selected the credential they want, they will add it and request funding. Once they request

Figure 2 — ArmyIgnitED Website (<https://www.armyignited.com>)



The image shows a screenshot of the ArmyIgnitED website. The top navigation bar includes the 'ignited' logo, 'Why ArmyIgnitED', 'Learn Anywhere', 'Opportunities', 'Your Journey', and a 'Get Started' button. The main content area features a laptop displaying the 'Student Profile Page' with sections for 'Student's Request Queue', 'Education Path Request', and 'Education'. To the right, a large '01' graphic is followed by the heading 'Why ArmyIgnitED'. Below this, a paragraph states: 'ArmyIgnitED is a tailored, intuitive resource that empowers you to achieve your educational goals. Whether you're at home or abroad, you'll have unlimited access to educational opportunities, support, and guidance throughout your desired Education Path, Civilian Path, Credential, or Army ROTC scholarship program.'

100,000+
Student Enrollments

\$4,000
Per Year in TA/CA Funding

300,000+
College Courses

funding, Soldiers get to choose the provider they want to receive training from. After Soldiers submit their request to ArmyIgnitED, it can take 30 days to receive funding. Leaders need to sit down with Soldiers and ensure that they have time available to complete the credential training. Soldiers must consider items such as the company's short-term training calendar especially considering items that would take them away from internet connectivity such as field exercises or Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations.

As leaders, we must make the time and commitment to our Soldiers to ensure their personal and professional development. We must make the investment and learn about education benefits that Soldiers can use while they serve. When done successfully, we create future leaders, our successors, both in and out of the military who capable and confident. In return, they will educate future generations of Soldiers on how to better themselves and the U.S. Army as a whole.

Notes

¹ "Tuition Assistance," MyArmyBenefits, accessed 13 February from [https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Tuition-Assistance-\(TA\)](https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Tuition-Assistance-(TA)).

² Ibid.

³ Army Credentialing Opportunities On-Line — Costs and Funding, accessed 13 February from https://cool.osd.mil/army/costs_and_funding/index.htm.

⁴ National Security Agency/Central Security Service, National Centers of Academic Excellence, accessed 13 February from <https://www.nsa.gov/Academics/Centers-of-Academic-Excellence>.

⁵ "It Starts with a Spark," ArmyIgnitED, accessed 13 February from <https://www.armyignited.com/app>.

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