BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Army is in the process of implementing The Army Distance Learning Program (TADLP). Its intent is to substitute distance learning (DL) for portions of current resident instruction, with an eye to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of training. Implementation of this program will have a wide-ranging effect on how the Army trains and develops its leaders. It will directly affect how the Army goes about achieving three of its major goals: Manning the Force and Investing in Quality People, Maintaining Unit Readiness and Training, and Training and Leader Development. These are Lines of Operation 3, 4, and 5 specified in the Army’s Transformation Campaign Plan. Since the personnel community plays a key role in achieving these goals, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) asked RAND Arroyo Center to examine some of the potential implications of DL for personnel readiness. This document provides the results of one portion of that analysis: the potential for DL to enhance stability and professional development of the Army’s soldiers and leaders. Although this research was done for the Army’s personnel community, the distance learning program and its implementation are of interest to the Army and the national defense community at large, and not just to those directly concerned with training or personnel management.

APPROACH

The research focused first on one officer course, the Armor Captains Career Course, to determine the potential effects of DL. Captains
career courses have two components: a branch-specific advanced course, taught at the branch school, and the Combined Arms and Service Support School (CAS3), taught at Fort Leavenworth, which is a course for junior staff officers of all branches. The Army already offers a Reserve Component (RC) Armor Officer Advanced Course that is almost totally conducted by DL, having only a two-week resident phase. The current pattern for the Active Component (AC) career course includes a resident advanced course phase of eighteen weeks, a six-week phase at Fort Leavenworth where the students take the CAS3 course, and, for most students, a three-week tank or cavalry troop commander’s course at Fort Knox. For the Active Component career course, we looked at the effects of converting 25 percent of the resident portion of the advanced course segment to DL, and reduced the time allotted to that portion of the course sequence by 30 percent. Applying these factors to the Armor Officer Advanced Course results in a 16-day DL phase and a 94-day resident phase. With this course structure as a basis, we explored four alternatives to the current practice. The alternatives explore different combinations of permanent change of station (PCS) and temporary duty (TDY) status to determine a range of possible effects on time at home station (i.e., increasing stability) and some of the relevant costs. Once we completed the analysis of the Armor Captains Career Course, we then extended the results of that analysis to other career courses and other types of courses.

RESULTS

For each option, we determined how much total time at home station increased, i.e., how much less time the student would spend away at school. But since some of the time at home station must be devoted to the DL instruction, we calculated the amount of time DL studies would take and derived a second figure, subtracting DL study time to get a measure of how much additional time could be available to units. We also calculated a minimum figure for availability. This figure is based on a strict assumption that the student would be unavailable to the unit during any of the time devoted to DL. In practice, it is likely that a DL student could participate in some unit activities with no detriment to the DL study, even when concentrating on DL.
The four options increase the time on home station from 32 to 43 days per officer depending on the mix of PCS and TDY status. Stripping out the time necessary for DL yields between 16 and 27 additional days available to the unit. Using conservative assumptions, we also derived a minimum estimated increase of between 8 and 15 available duty days, again depending on the PCS/TDY mix chosen. These figures, when generalized to the Army’s population of captains bound for career courses each year, indicate an increase of 300 to 340 available man-years (using the overall time-on-station measure) and between 115 and 135 working man-years (using our minimum measure). Since availability of captains is currently a significant issue for the Army, we regard these benefits as significant. The effect on well-being (specifically, time available at home with families and friends) varies among options. If the entire course is done in a TDY status, the officer spends much more time away from his or her family than with the current course, which is done in a PCS mode, with the family accompanying the officer.

Although we did not undertake a full-fledged comparative cost analysis of the Army’s institutional training programs, we did estimate the travel and PCS costs associated with our various DL options. These costs do not vary much from the current practice of a combination of PCS and TDY. Three of the four options considered are more expensive than the current one, but only slightly so. The primary difference is that these options involve significantly more TDY, and the TDY expenses more than offset the savings from reducing PCS moves.

EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS

Extending the analysis to other courses done in a TDY mode only, we find that the broad findings from the Armor Captains Career Course hold true: DL conversion enhances stability by keeping soldiers in their units longer. For example, applying the analysis to the Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course for Artillery Fire Support Specialists shows a maximum increase in days available of 26 days and a minimum of an additional 7 days, again on a per-student basis. Other courses such as reclassification training or short-duration courses also show benefits. But since benefits are generally proportionate to course length, shorter courses naturally yield smaller
benefits. Overall, we estimate on-station man-year increases to be just under 2,400, with an increase in available work-years (our minimum measure) of about 840.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Converting portions of the Army’s resident courses to DL gives soldiers more time with their units and, in general, with their families and friends as well. Summing across all courses we looked at that could convert some portion of the instruction to DL, we get an estimate of between 2,700 and 2,800 additional man-years on home station, of which a significant portion must be devoted to the DL training. Still, the units experience a net gain in leader presence, about 950 to 1,000 working man-years by our minimum estimates. This represents just less than 5 percent of the estimated man-years devoted to schooling each year; because of our methodology we believe this is a conservative estimate. Conversion to DL offers some savings in TDY costs as well, in those cases where the resident portion of a TDY course can be shortened.

We recommend that the Army continue to pursue the options it is examining for bringing DL modules into its officer advanced courses and thereby reducing the overall duration of these courses. We also recommend that the Army retain the PCS variant of these courses since it is no more expensive than TDY variants and avoids significant increases in family separations. If avoiding family moves is enough of a concern for some of these officers, the Army could experiment with a pilot program in which some officers might be allowed to take the course on a TDY basis. This will raise costs slightly relative to alternatives where the course is done on a PCS basis, but it may be worthy of experimentation. We further recommend that the Army concentrate more DL program efforts on developing courseware first for TDY professional development courses that appear to have larger stability and savings payoffs.

On a broader front, we recommend that the Army explore more fully the numerous additional ways of capitalizing on emerging DL technology. The Army already sees DL as a key enabler for its initiatives to enhance education opportunities for first-term soldiers; the same could be done to expand education opportunities for officers and NCOs as well. Other potential ways to capitalize on DL include pro-
viding “just in time” training for both units and individuals, short modules for skill refreshers or upgrades, and job aid packages that could be integrated into staff training programs.

Finally, we observe that a significant degree of caution is needed in implementing the various features of TADLP. Adapting field units and organizations to a program that requires home study will be a challenge, and we view the requirement for dedicated study time as key to the success of the DL program. More also needs to be known about the comparative costs of the overall program. Savings, to the extent they will accrue, are still largely in the future. Moreover, some types of savings (e.g., TDY) are more predictable than others (e.g., instructors and staff, who will still be needed to support DL phases as well as resident phases). The Army has produced economic analyses that estimate savings from the DL program, but more needs to be known about the actual achievement of these savings as the program is implemented: their magnitude, the form they take, and their relationship to the hardware and facilities costs associated with DL implementation. Thus, we recommend that the Army closely monitor the interaction of its DL program with the overall costs of institutional training programs. This will enable better focus on the best possible payoffs for both DL and residential training.