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Increasing Participation in Army Continuing Education

eArmyU and Effects of Possible
Program Changes

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Summary

Background

The United States Army offers a continuing education program called eArmyU (an e-learning, computer-based program) that allows enlisted soldiers to earn college credits and degrees at no or low cost while they serve on active duty. eArmyU provides access to more than 90 online programs from more than 20 colleges and universities with the credits being fully transferable among those institutions. The program includes up to 100 percent funding for tuition, books, fees, email, and an internet service provider (ISP). The current program also provides a fully-funded personal laptop computer and a 24-hour/7-day-a-week helpdesk. Participating schools must provide the maximum allowable credit for military training and experience as well as for tests such as the CLEP (College Level Examination Program) (this is not necessarily the case with unaffiliated schools). eArmyU also provides an integrated online interface with all participating schools, with common application and registration forms, a degree map customized for the soldier that tracks his or her progress toward degrees, an integrated searchable catalog from the schools, and library, tutoring, and academic advisement services.

At the time of this study, to be eligible for the program, a soldier had to complete a Service Remaining Requirement (SRR) of three years, either through his or her current obligation or through exten-

sion of that obligation or reenlistment.¹ The enrollee in eArmyU also had an obligation to successfully complete at least 12 semester hours of courses during the first two years of enrollment.

At the time this research was requested, the Army offered the eArmyU program at 11 primary sites² and had an enrollment of just over 30,000 soldiers. The Army was interested in making the eArmyU program available Army-wide, but was concerned about the potential cost of doing so. At the beginning of FY03, a change in DoD policy raised the maximum tuition assistance for continuing education classes from 75 to 100 percent, eliminating an important difference between these classes and those taken under eArmyU. As a result, the incremental cost of eArmyU versus the tuition assistance program was attributed primarily to the laptop provided under eArmyU, and program administrators considered discontinuing funding for the laptop in order to reduce eArmyU's per-capita cost. However, the effects of removing the laptop or other eArmyU provisions were unknown. These effects can be categorized into four broad issues: (1) the willingness and ability of soldiers to participate, (2) the quality of life for soldiers and their families, (3) retention, and (4) readiness and duty performance. In the remainder of this summary, we outline the study methodology used, then move to a discussion of the highlights of the study results.

RAND Arroyo Center Study Took a Multi-Method Approach

To identify the potential effects of changes in the eArmyU program, the study employed four complementary analytical approaches.

¹ The criteria for eligibility are currently under review. Throughout this document, the "current" program refers to the program benefits and eligibility requirements described here (those in effect at the time of this study).

² Primary sites offer enrollments and support to the eArmyU program. Soldiers may be reassigned to other locations and take the program with them, though support is slightly different in these instances.

First, there was a pilot test of alternative eArmyU programs across nine test sites: three sites offering the current program, three (current) sites offering a laptop-optional program, and three (new) sites offering a no-laptop program.

Second, to gather detailed information about eArmyU, 10 focus groups were conducted at the test sites during two-day visits.³ These included six groups of soldier-eArmyU students, two groups of their immediate supervisors, and two groups of eArmyU counselors and administrators.

Third, personnel records were analyzed to describe how enrollees in eArmyU differ from nonenrollees and to assess the retention effects of the current version of eArmyU. This included assessing the mix of enrollees among those already meeting the SRR, those extending, or those reenlisting and the overall impact on years of service remaining.

Fourth, 8,000 enlisted soldiers were randomly selected to participate in a survey of educational aspirations (including their potential interest in eArmyU and other education programs), their Army career plans, and the linkage between the two.

The pilot test was initiated on January 27, 2003. Site visits and focus groups began on March 5.

Results

The study results cover four primary areas: participation, retention, duty performance, and quality of life. In addition, the focus groups provided an opportunity to explore the value that soldiers attach to the various elements of the eArmyU program as well as to ask program administrators about issues concerning qualification standards

³ Originally, focus groups were to be conducted at each of the nine test sites. This became impractical at three of the sites due to preparations for and deployments related to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) as well as low enrollment rates at two of the no-laptop sites (related in part to OIF). Video conferences were conducted with the Education Center staffs at these sites in lieu of the site visits.

for eArmyU program participation. Below, we provide an overview of the points raised in those discussions.

Participation

Who has been most likely to enroll in the traditional eArmyU program? According to the study results analyzing eArmyU records, those especially likely to enroll include:

- African American soldiers,
- female soldiers,
- AFQT Category I–IIIA soldiers (average to above-average intelligence levels),
- married soldiers,
- soldiers with dependents, and
- senior soldiers (especially E6–E7).

The survey further indicates that soldiers planning to reenlist or stay until retirement; those having three or more years to their expiration of term of service (ETS); those wanting two years or more of college or a degree; those already continuing their education or planning to enroll soon; those believing obtaining more education is important to the ability to compete within their military careers or for a civilian job; those confident in their ability to undertake or who prefer online courses; soldiers thinking of leaving the Army for more time with their families; those having a home computer (57 percent); and those needing the free laptop to participate (90 percent say it would help greatly, 52 percent say it is critical) would be more likely to enroll in the current program.

The pilot test results clearly show that the fully-funded laptop is a very important element underlying soldiers' participation in eArmyU. If the laptop is optional, most soldiers will choose to take it, at least in the near term. If the laptop is not provided, eArmyU participation rates are likely to decline significantly. Although the overall pattern of results is clearly downward, the specific numbers in the pilot test results should be interpreted with caution. Procedural and deployment issues occurred during the pilot test that would not

similarly affect a future Army-wide roll-out of the program. These were, most notably, screening procedures for participation, awareness of the laptop program, and Iraq-related deployments. It is possible that the pilot test underestimates the actual take-rate that might be seen.

Indeed, the survey results show greater potential participation rates than the pilot test for the no-laptop version of eArmyU. These results suggest that over time, participation rates with the laptop option might grow to two-thirds or more of eligible soldiers, whereas without the laptop option, participation rates might top out at one-third to one-half, depending on whether soldiers could use their own computers or had to buy the laptop currently provided by the Army. The results also indicate that soldiers currently continuing their education, those needing the laptop to participate in eArmyU (e.g., young soldiers, minorities), those concerned with pay or time away from their family, and male soldiers would be particularly adversely affected by removal of the laptop. Soldiers wanting only a limited amount of college or who have only 1–2 years of service until their ETS are more open to the “no-laptop” option than others.

Results from the focus groups indicate that soldiers would like the option of choosing or not choosing the laptop. Many soldiers need the laptop to participate, and soldiers also stress the benefits of its portability. Some find they can continue their classes while on deployments, training exercises, or temporary duty (TDY). At the same time, some don't need the laptop and would welcome the reduced SRR or course requirements to reduce the commitment and possibility of recoupment.⁴ Others want more courses than the \$4,500 annual tuition assistance cap allows after deduction of the technology package; this includes senior soldiers wanting a degree before retirement.

⁴ If the semester hour obligation is not met, eArmyU's recoupment policy requires that the soldier pay a prorated share of the cost of the laptop based on the portion of the requirement not completed. The recoupment policy also requires payment of tuition costs for any failed courses.

Retention

Personnel records from the Total Army Personnel Data Base (TAPDB) and eArmyU files indicate that the current eArmyU program is associated with increased retention. Specifically, the TAPDB shows that eArmyU participants have one year longer to their ETS date than demographically similar nonparticipants, and analysis of eArmyU records shows that 25 to 30 percent of the participants extend or reenlist to participate. The survey results are generally consistent with the finding from the personnel record analysis of longer time to ETS for program participants. They also show that soldiers planning to reenlist or stay to retirement are more interested in eArmyU than those planning to leave the Army soon. Focus group discussions with participants also reflect this mix of greater commitment to an Army career with extensions or reenlistments specifically made to participate in eArmyU. Soldiers are motivated both by improving their in-service promotion opportunities as well as their post-service earnings. Some who reenlisted or extended for eArmyU indicated that they would have done so in the absence of eArmyU, whereas others reported that they extended/reenlisted primarily for eArmyU. Considering the frequency of extensions and reenlistments, the time added to ETS by each, and the fraction of soldiers reporting that they extended/reenlisted in order to participate, the extensions and reenlistments appear to account for up to half of the overall difference in time to ETS.

Duty Performance

Many focus group participants report using their laptops to assist them in performing their duties. They primarily report using them to help process paperwork at home and, for fewer soldiers, at their duty locations. They can also be used on deployments or TDYs in some cases. For junior soldiers or those in more combat-oriented military occupational specialties (MOSs), the eArmyU laptop may be the only computer readily available to them at their duty location or home. Some soldiers and supervisors report improved duty performance from eArmyU classes, participation, or equipment, but this is less

typical. Supervisors generally say they support continued education; they report little interference with performance of duties.

Quality of Life

Many focus group participants report using their eArmyU laptop and ISP routinely to meet personal needs or desires. These include getting work done while spending time with their family, getting information through the Internet, contacting family members or friends, and providing computer access to other family members (including for their schooling or jobs). Some focus group members also cite the importance of the laptop when traveling for the Army or when on leave. Uses include both tasks done locally on the laptop and via Internet connections.

What Do Soldiers Value About eArmyU?

Soldiers indicate that what they value most about eArmyU is its flexibility—they are able to fit in their education around work, family, field training, and other activities. Tuition assistance is also deemed important by soldiers, as are the free books and delivery. While many soldiers reported that the Army-provided laptop is very important, many also use their own computers (unless on travel, when the laptop and ISP are more highly valued). The Army-provided ISP is more important for soldiers who live in barracks; many older soldiers have their own ISP, DSL, or cable service.

Soldiers noted that withdrawing laptops may not be cost free, since the Army may need to monitor and maintain approved on-post computers. They also note the possibility of using the eArmyU laptop or ISP to facilitate completion of NCO courses online or with CDs, or to access Army Knowledge Online, thus reducing the need for other resources for these purposes. Opportunity costs of not providing the free laptop on quality of life and duty performance would need to be accounted for, as would any cost implications of additional time or staff required if soldiers were not able to use the laptop to help keep current on their duties.

Qualification Standards

Soldiers and Education Center staffs both suggested the need for qualification standards for eArmyU. These could include a minimum aptitude level (General Technical (GT) score from the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) and reading grade level; a proven ability to complete college courses or required initial completion of attendance-based or online classes; a placement test to demonstrate computer literacy or a required initial course; a delay in eligibility so junior soldiers can first gain some Army experience to understand their job requirements; and the possibility of requiring an upfront fee to discourage enrollments by soldiers who enroll primarily for laptops or who have not thought through the required commitment to complete their courses and avoid recoupment.⁵

Recommendations

The Army has outlined several key goals for the eArmyU program. We organize our recommendations by the overarching Army goal that they support.

Goal: Increase enlisted access to education opportunities

To help increase enlisted access to continuing education opportunities, we recommend that the Army open eArmyU to enrollments at more sites, and, eventually, at all posts. It should consider basing the slots allocated to each post on the post's E4–E9 population less current enrollees. We recommend that eArmyU retain its highly valued core features: tuition assistance, free books and delivery, and the common internet interface. To avoid constraining participation among junior soldiers or those with financial challenges, options for an Army-funded laptop and ISP should be included.

⁵ Soldiers who do not complete their semester hour or service remaining requirement are required to reimburse the Army for the value of a prorated share of the laptop cost corresponding to the portion of the 12 semester hours/SRR not completed.

Goal: Constrain eArmyU costs to facilitate increased enlisted access

We recommend offering soldiers more options that increase the flexibility of eArmyU for them while controlling costs. These could include options that encourage soldiers not to take unnecessary technology features (laptop or ISP) by reducing requirements (SRR, semester hours) for more limited packages but maintaining eligibility (three years or until ETS if sooner). Soldiers also should be discouraged from taking laptop or ISP features they do not need by having to share costs, for example, by their inclusion in the tuition cap or by initial co-payment. The impact of cost-sharing on more advanced students could be offset by considering graduated tuition assistance caps based on costs for different degrees and courses. The Army could also facilitate continuity of education by improving transferability of credits into eArmyU from other online programs, or to other online programs after completion of eArmyU coursework.

Goal: Limit soldiers' risk of recoupment in eArmyU

We recommend that realistic, thorough information be provided to soldiers up front on the challenges as well as opportunities of eArmyU (by counselors, existing students, and supervisors). We recommend enhancing supervisors' and Education Center staff's ability to track a soldier's progress and intervene if needed to help the soldier avoid the need for recoupment.

We also recommend establishing and enforcing prerequisites that enhance a soldier's likelihood of success in eArmyU. After discussions with the Education Center staff members at the current sites, eArmyU administrators should agree on and enforce a qualification-based procedure to fill the slots. As noted, the prerequisites could include thresholds for GT score and reading grade level; the proven ability to complete college courses in the past or required completion of initial attendance-based classes, online classes, or both; a placement test to demonstrate computer literacy or a required course; a minimum time in service or a minimum pay grade (for example, E4); and reducing ill-advised enrollments by requiring limited initial co-payment (amount to be determined, based on affordability, course enrollment, and technology options).