

Blended Education at the U.S. Army War College: Adapting to modern learning realities

By Robert D. Martin, USAWC PAO 05 October 2023



The introduction of the Blended Education Program allows the War College to adapt to the changing realities of the digital age and to maintain its commitment to producing forward-thinking military leaders

The education landscape has been continually evolving, and the U.S. Army War College is at the forefront of this transformation with its innovative Blended Education Program. This groundbreaking initiative, introduced in the Academic Year 2024, combines remote and in-person learning to create a dynamic and comprehensive educational experience for its students. The BEP fulfills the Military Education Level 1 and Joint Professional Military Education Level II requirements and culminates in the award of a Master of Security Studies degree.

Hybrid Learning for the Military Leaders of Tomorrow

“I see blended education providing the same learning outcomes as the other resident students just through a different means,” said Lt. Col. Shay O’Neal. “Blended education allows us as a student to continue with our

professional military education while balancing some of those competing priorities, for example - family.”

“My daughter is a senior in high school this year, so I would be faced with moving my daughter who is very active in her school. Do I want to move her just for a year or do I want to attend as a geographic bachelorette? The blended opportunity takes the decision off the table because I don’t have to decide on the Army or family at this career junction. I can do both Army and family simultaneously,” she said.

The Blended Education Program is tailored to accommodate the needs of students who are part of the Resident Education Program at the USAWC but face significant challenges regarding the Permanent Change of Station to Carlisle. By offering a hybrid approach, the program acknowledges the complexities of military personnel's lives and responsibilities while ensuring that valuable education is not compromised.

“It affords those who don’t want to or have something else going on in their life that would prevent them from being fully committed to the resident program,” said Marine Lt. Col. Michael Carey. “There would have been a family decision that would have had to be made to attend the War College. That could have created some family friction to live apart for ten months, but because of this program, it is no longer a concern to our family.”

“It is a perfect mix to allow my family to do what they need to do and stay where they are. It allows for an immersive experience you cannot replicate with the distance education program. The first month has been invaluable. You can’t consider this a blended program without first coming to the War College.

The program structure is carefully designed to optimize learning outcomes. The students belonging to Seminar 24 commence their journey with an immersive experience at the Carlisle campus, where they complete the Strategic Foundations Course. During this phase, they engage in activities that build a standard foundation, such as the National Strategic Staff Ride to Gettysburg National Military Park. This shared experience fosters a sense of camaraderie and provides a historical context they can draw upon throughout their learning journey.

“I feel the blended education is a great way of continuing professional education, and the appropriate way to do it is the way the Army War College is doing it as a pilot program,” said Army Col. Michael Garry. “Blended education is tailored to the same course the resident students are getting except for a few periods when in-person lectures are done virtually.”

“From a personal perspective, I have never done an online course; I am an in-person learner, so I am very conscious of the challenges that I may have and am hyper-prepared to participate in the discussion virtually. I’ll have to prepare my space appropriately and safeguard that space in terms of distractions and time. We wrote this in our seminar bylaws. I can see each of the different environments placing demands on our time,” he said.

Pros of Blended Education

1. **Flexibility:** The blend of remote and in-person learning allows students to manage their military responsibilities while pursuing education. This flexibility is crucial for military officers with demanding assignments and deployments.
2. **Leveraging Technology:** Using digital platforms and technologies enables students to access resources, participate in discussions, and submit assignments online. This harnessing of technology reflects the modern landscape of military operations.
3. **Tailored Learning:** Students can engage with course materials at their own pace, allowing for a more personalized learning experience. This tailoring is particularly effective as military officers bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives to the classroom.

Cons of Blended Education

1. **Limited In-Person Interaction:** While technology bridges geographical gaps, it cannot replace the rich interactions that occur in face-to-face settings. Certain aspects of learning, such as nuanced discussions and immediate feedback, might be compromised in remote locations.
2. **Self-Discipline:** Blended learning demands more self-discipline and time management. Students must proactively engage with course materials and resist the temptation of distractions.
3. **Technical Challenges:** Access to reliable technology and internet connectivity can be challenging, particularly for military personnel stationed in various locations. Technical issues hinder seamless participation in online components.

A Collaborative Faculty Team

The success of the Blended Education Program owes much to the collaborative efforts of the faculty team comprising Col. Trent Hunton,

Cmdr. Michael Posey, Dr. Mark Duckentfield, and Dr. Gregory Cantwell. Developing an innovative and practical curriculum that merges online and in-person elements ensures the program maintains its rigor and educational excellence.

Looking Ahead

The introduction of the Blended Education Program allows the War College to adapt to the changing realities of the digital age and to maintain its commitment to producing forward-thinking military leaders. As the program continues to evolve, its successes and challenges will undoubtedly provide valuable insights into the future of education.