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STUDENT AND COURSE EVALUATION
AT THE
COMBINED ARMS AND SERVICES STAFF SCHOOL

BY

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↙ This paper focuses on the student and course evaluation that was performed during Phase II of the Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS³) in its initial implementation, April through June 1981. Descriptions of the CAS³, training philosophy, goals, and instructional techniques are provided as background. The performance oriented student evaluation philosophy and rating scheme is explained. Results and student acceptance of this student evaluation system are discussed. The information sources and results of the course evaluation are also presented. ↘

BACKGROUND

The Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS³) is designed to train officers of the Active Army and Reserve Components, worldwide, to function as staff officers with the Army in the field. The course consists of two phases: Phase I is a nonresident course which the officer completes prior to attending the resident portion; Phase II is the resident phase which will be attended in a TDY status. The approximate length of the course is 142 academic hours for Phase I and 360 hours for Phase II. The curriculum provides several opportunities, as a staff officer, to think about and analyze situations; formulate courses of action; and recommend and justify a selected course of action to his/her commander. This paper focuses on the student and course evaluation that was performed during Phase II of CAS³ in its initial implementation, April through June 1981.

The Phase II CAS³ educational and training philosophy is that the student learns by doing. The student participates in seven staff exercises each of which serves as the focal point for the staff interactive process. The seven exercises are linked together through a course-long general scenario.

CAS³ believes that successful performance as a staff officer requires: (1) the ability to analyze and solve military problems, (2) effective communication skills, (3) the ability to interact and coordinate as a member of a staff, and (4) an understanding of Army organization, operations, and procedures. The primary function of CAS³ is the development and improvement of these qualities within the individual students assigned. As such, the curriculum of CAS³ has been designed to provide each student with opportunities for personal growth in each of the aforementioned areas. Phase I primarily addresses the fourth requirement while the Phase II instruction addresses the all the requirements. Furthermore, the Phase I cognitive objectives are generally directed at the knowledge and comprehension level of Bloom's taxonomy while the Phase II cognitive objectives are directed at the higher four levels of the taxonomy.

The educational method used during Phase II is markedly different from that employed at other levels of the officer education system. The educational method revolves around the small group participatory process. The students are formed into small groups, or staffs, of 12 individuals. Students fill a variety of roles in these staffs normally based upon their specialities and educational needs. It is within these staff group that the staff processes and products are encountered and developed. Each staff group is under the continuous tutelage of one member of the faculty, the Staff Leader. This individual is the proctor, instructor, monitor, advisor, and evaluator for his staff. He is responsible for the education of his staff group members. He monitors the progress of his students and insures that the students achieve the educational goals and objectives of the course.

PHASE II STUDENT EVALUATION

The main purpose of the Phase II evaluation system is to provide an indepth assessment of each student's demonstrated capabilities throughout the seven staff exercises as a basis to enhance student growth and development. As such, the evaluation process focuses on the four staff officer requirements stated previously. Secondly, the evaluation system is used to assess the curriculum, maintain standards for graduation, and insure student accomplishment of the course objectives.

The evaluation philosophy of CAS³ is that the staff leader is in the best position to provide an honest assessment of student capabilities and suggestions for improvement. Hence, there are no standard examinations in Phase II. Instead, the staff leader is constantly evaluating a student's performance and providing feedback both formally and informally. The formal feedback is provided as staff leader ratings on the learning objectives and goals of instruction. The informal feedback consists of the day-to-day written and oral comments provided by the staff leader. A basic principle at CAS³ is that a student's work is at an acceptable level when the course begins and that the work remains acceptable until definitely demonstrated otherwise. The final student assessment is based on the capabilities of the student as he/she exits the course and is not cumulative in nature.

Informal Evaluation

Staff leaders control the day-to-day feedback and evaluation of students. In this regard, staff leaders use group discussion, the coordination of staff plans, briefings, answers to impromptu questions as well as written assignments in the evaluation of student performance.

Written products are reviewed and critiqued as appropriate, and then returned to students for information or action. At the discretion of the staff leader, a written task may require redoing. Staff leader oral and written comments, as well as consultation, provide adequate opportunities for feedback concerning oral briefings. As with written products, a briefing may require repetition.

Formal Evaluation

The student receives two interim and a final evaluation during Phase II from his/her staff leader. These evaluations focus on the ability to analyze and solve military problems, communicate effectively, and the ability to interact and coordinate as a member of a staff. The first interim evaluation occurs immediately following the staff techniques exercise (2 weeks after the course begins) and provides an initial assessment of each student's strengths and weaknesses. The second interim evaluation occurs upon completion of the budget exercise (5 weeks). This evaluation summarizes each student's demonstrated performance during the logistics, training, and budget exercises. The final evaluation is similar to the two interim evaluations and occurs at the close of the European scenario exercise. The intent of these evaluations is to let each student know how the staff leader rates the student's performance to date, and the progress toward attaining the terminal course objectives.

Each interim and final report is composed of two main parts. The first part consists of ratings on the specific objectives of the CAS³ curriculum. The second part is a narrative description of the student's performance and may be used to highlight student strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for further development. Figure 1 provides an example of a completed final report.

Upon the completion of Phase II, a course report is developed for each student. This course report contains the narrative section from the interim reports, ratings on terminal objectives of the CAS³ curriculum, a narrative summary of the student's performance while attending CAS³, an assigned overall rating of performance for the course, as well as the Commandant's remarks, if any. All ratings are assigned using the system defined below. The course report is retained as the official summary of performance at CAS³.

The rating scheme to be used for evaluation the student performance consists of seven categories, as defined below:

1. Exceeded Course Standards--Superior performance; exceeded expectations.
2. Achieved Course Standards Plus--Acceptable performance; somewhat above expectations.
3. Achieved Course Standards--Acceptable performance; met expectations.
4. Achieved Course Standards Minus--Acceptable performance; slightly below expectations.
5. Marginally Achieved Course Standards--Borderline performance; below expectations; improvement required.
6. Failed to Achieve Course Standards--Unacceptable performance; far below expectations.
7. Not Evaluated--Unobserved performance; no opportunity for evaluation.

In addition, an Academic Evaluation Report (AER) is required for each student's official personnel file. Because of the pilot nature of this course, a waiver was obtained for individual reports and all students were issued identical reports with a narrative description of the course. Eventually CAS³ hopes to gain permission to replace the standard AER with the Course Report which is unique to the outcomes of CAS³.

Results

One hundred seventeen Captains and Majors graduated from the first CAS³ course. A summary of their final ratings is provided in table 1.

GUIDE TO GRADING

- E Exceeded Course Standards
- A Achieved Course Standards
- M Marginally Achieved Course Standards
- F Failed to Achieve Course Standards
- N Not Evaluated

COMBINED ARMS AND SERVICES
STAFF SCHOOL

COURSE 8101

STUDENT NO: 999

RANK: CPT

NAME: John Doe

BRANCH: IN

THIRD REPORT

(Preparation for Combat Exercise)
(Mobilization/Deployment Exercise)
(European Scenario Exercise)

PART 1 - COURSE PERFORMANCE

Subject and Level of Performance	Grade	Subject and Level of Performance	Grade
1. Demonstrated the ability to analyze a corps OPLAN (Mission Analysis).	N	10. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the preparations of staff estimates for a division defensive/offensive mission.	A+
2. Demonstrated the ability to write a division warning order.	N	11. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the development of a defensive/offensive OPOD with supporting annexes and overlap.	A+
3. Demonstrated the ability to prepare a division staff estimate (G-1/G-2/G-3/G-4) given a division mission and a Corps OPLAN.	A	12. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the execution of a defensive/offensive OPOD during a command post exercise.	A
4. Demonstrated the ability to write a defensive OPLAN and prepare one or more supporting annexes.	A	13. Demonstrated the ability to present ideas orally on military subjects clearly and concisely.	A-
5. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the development of a plan of action for the mobilization of a reserve component unit.	A+	14. Demonstrated the ability to employ quantitative decision methods where appropriate.	N
6. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the development of advance party and arrival plans for a reserve component unit.	N	15. Demonstrated an attitude of professionalism in the performance of exercise requirements.	A+
7. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the development of a closure plan for a mobilized reserve component unit.	A	16. Demonstrated the ability to interact with peers to develop/coordinate a staff product.	A+
8. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in the preparation of a plan of action to bring the division to readiness condition C-1.	N	17. Demonstrated the ability to clearly and concisely present written ideas regarding military subjects.	A-
9. Demonstrated the ability to perform staff duties in developing a staff estimate for the deployment of a division from mobilization station to the tactical area of operation.	A		

PART 2 - NARRATIVE

CPT Doe achieved course standards in all areas. He is a totally professional officer and this is evident in his attitude as well as in his work. He is a total team player who interacts well with his peers. He showed a firm grasp of the decision making process in the preparation of estimates/OPLANS & OPOD's at the division level. He needs to continue to work on organizing and clearly presenting oral and written products.

PART 3 - STUDENT'S SIGNATURE

24 June 81
Date

John Doe
Name ✓ John Doe

CPT
Rank

PART 4 - STAFF LEADER'S SIGNATURE

24 June 81
Date

John Smith
Name John Smith

LTC
Rank

Figure 1. Completed final report.

Table 1. Course ratings for the first CAS³ class.

Category	Number	Percent
Exceeded Course Standard	11	9.4
Achieved Course Standard Plus	41	35.0
Achieved Course Standard	51	43.6
Achieved Course Standard Minus	10	8.5
Marginally Achieved Course Standard	4	3.4
Failed to Achieve Course Standard	0	0.0

At the end of Phase II the students were queried about the Phase II evaluation system. Remarkably, 60 percent responded favorably. Only 15 percent were dissatisfied enough with the evaluation system to respond in a completely negative manner. Of the remaining 25 percent, 5 percent were indecisive and 20 percent were deemed favorable with reservations. Several students perceived the standards as fuzzy or nonexistent, but regarded the evaluation as fair and equitable. Others shared this opinion for the evaluation taking place within their staff group, but indicated they questioned whether the evaluation was fair and equitable across groups because of different staff leader emphases. One student's thoughts were particularly appropriate: "The evaluation was subjective but far better than a series of objective tests." Another student commented that the varying backgrounds preclude any completely fair and equitable evaluation but the current system is acceptable as long as the course remains essentially pass/fail. In conclusion, it appears the students perceived the present system as acceptable/favorable when compared to the possible alternatives. As several students indicated, positive steps, such as further staff leader training and staff leader group sessions reviewing previously assigned grades, should be undertaken to insure consistent evaluation across groups.

Additionally, the widespread assignment of "achieved course standards" or worse, the detailed and specific recommendations, as well as the frequent requirement to redo papers at the beginning of the course seemed to produce the following results. The fact that everyone was receiving severe criticism and receiving approximately the same grades began to foster cooperation rather than competition within the staff groups. After the staff leader set the standard for excellence, peer pressure to do well reinforced this standard. Because the evaluation process lacked absolute standards, the staff leader was able to raise his expectations for individuals as the course progressed. Thus, the course remained a challenge for each student until completion.

PHASE II COURSE EVALUATION

Since this was the pilot course of CAS³, naturally the course evaluation focused on formative rather than summative evaluation issues. That is, the purpose of the course evaluation was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum to accomplish the stated objectives and provide the basis for curriculum revision as necessary. The evaluation emphasized the course materials, course contents, instructional techniques, and student evaluation system. Primarily, the information gathered from the staff leaders and students themselves formed the basis for the evaluation although comments from the authors, administrative personnel, and student records supplemented the primary sources.

Information Sources

As each student proceeded through Phase II, the student was asked to maintain a file of comments on an exercise questionnaire. Standard questions regarding Phase I preparation, instructional design, and exercise relevancy were asked. Additionally, space was provided and general questions asked to obtain information regarding unclear assignments, directions, written materials, course contents, etc. The completed questionnaires were forwarded to the exercise authors for review.

As each staff leader proceeded through Phase II, the staff leader was asked to maintain a file of comments on each exercise. These comments reflected teaching difficulties and suggested improvements. Upon course completion the staff leaders met and assembled a master list of comments for each exercise.

To examine the grading standards across staff groups, the top two and bottom two papers of each written assignment were reviewed by the director. Also, the director frequently visited the staff group rooms and monitored oral presentations and subsequently, the staff leader feedback. Reports of all staff leader ratings on the interim, final, and course evaluations were generated for the director as the course progressed.

Upon completion of Phase II, each student was administered a questionnaire of open-ended questions to assess the student's feelings toward the CAS³ experience. These comments were categorized according to their degree of favorableness toward the topic and then tabulated.

Results

Once the staff leaders had amassed their comments from each exercise and the authors had reviewed the student's exercise comments, the staff leaders and authors met to refine the curricular contents. Principally, the changes focused on the elimination of identified inconsistencies, the elimination of nonessential materials, the inclusion of new materials, the spacing of products requiring staff leader evaluation, and the resequencing of activities.

No major discrepancies in the staff leader grading standards resulted from the examination of this area. Some statistical comparisons did result in statistical significance, but the practical significance was not deemed large enough to require the directors intervention. Additionally, no student complaints were registered at the director level in this area. The high degree of staff leader consistency is hypothesized to result from the common experiences of the staff leaders (all LTCs and all but one former battalion commanders), their staff leader training, and their understanding of the evaluation philosophy.

Based upon the student end-of-course comments, the following general conclusions became evident.

1. Approximately 80 percent of the students stated that the curriculum was relevant for their branch as designed or with minor modifications. Additionally, 85 percent concluded the program is worth the monetary cost associated with implementation.
2. The strengths of CAS³ are the staff group concept, the association of contemporaries from differing branches, and the experienced staff leaders.
3. The course was particularly effective in providing feedback to students and instilling confidence in their abilities to brief, write, and defend solutions.
4. The performance oriented student evaluation system used during Phase II was well received by a majority of the students.
5. Several students reported that attendance at CAS³ instilled positive attitudes toward the Army and its training system.
6. The after actio. critiques revealed a tendency for students to focus their attentions on specific curriculum contents rather than on the learning of staff processes and procedures.
7. Phase I is marginally required in its current form and as presented as a prerequisite for Phase II. However, many students indicated it served as a good refresher course and provided valuable professional development information.
8. The learning objectives were not sufficiently integrated into the curriculum in a manner that was useful to students.
9. For the Phase II curriculum, students indicated that the current staff leader-centered instruction is more effective than instruction that could be received primarily from subject matter experts.
10. The pilot CAS³ program did not contain an overriding major flaw that severely restricted learning.