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Evaluating the Effectiveness of CAS3 from the Perspectives of the Students

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EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CAS3 FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE STUDENTS

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Evaluating the Effectiveness of CAS3 from the Perspectives of the Students

Introduction

The following report is based on responses given to open-ended written survey questions administered to captains at the conclusion of CAS3 class 96-4. Though recently condensed to six weeks, CAS3 was a nine-week course when these data were collected. Participants were asked three questions: What experience(s) did you have at CAS3 that you consider most valuable?, What experiences did you have at CAS3 that you consider least valuable?, and What changes would you like to see made to CAS3? A content analysis was performed on the responses to each of these questions. The most common responses are the focus of this report. The survey was administered during the last week of the course to eight staff groups consisting of twelve to thirteen students each. Of those staff groups, four comprised students who were attending the course early in their careers (3rd or 4th year of service), termed junior captains. The remaining four groups comprised captains in their 7th or 8th year of service who were termed senior captains. Any majors present were grouped with the senior captains.

Most valuable experiences at CAS3

Branch Interaction

Almost two-thirds of the senior captains and over one half of the junior captains listed the opportunity to interact with other branches as one of the most valuable experiences of CAS3. Though some perceived the situation as a way to network with senior officers and peers, most captains reported that CAS3 helped them to better understand the functions and missions of other branches in relation to their own. One student wrote, "The most valuable experience was the actual interfacing with officers from other branches. It allowed me to see with my own eyes the diverse leadership styles within the small group." A combat arms officer reported that CAS3 afforded a "much better appreciation for other officers from CSS and CS branches."

Briefings and problem solving

Nearly one-third of the captains cited the preparation and delivery of briefings as a valuable learning experience. One student commented that "briefings gave me a chance to improve my presentation style. I feel this allowed me to portray myself in the best possible way." One junior captain reported that the challenge of assembling and delivering an oral presentation within a limited amount of time was especially helpful. Having one's briefings critiqued by peers was also considered beneficial.

One quarter of the respondents reported learning the formal decision making process and systematic problem solving skills were among their most valuable experiences at CAS3. In addition, both junior and senior captains emphasized the importance of military writing assignments.

Junior/Senior differences

Although there is little difference between junior and senior captains regarding perceptions of branch interaction, briefings, or problem solving skills there are important differences in other areas. For example, five junior captains compared to only one senior captain listed volleyball as a positive experience. In turn, several senior captains listed volleyball as one of the least valuable experiences at CAS3. This finding will be explored in detail in the next section.

Table 1

Most Frequent Responses made by Junior and Senior Captains

Response	Junior Captains	Senior Captains
Most valuable experiences ^a		
Branch interaction/working with peers	52%	63%
Preparation and delivery of briefings	30%	25%
Decision making/problem solving exercises	24%	25%
Written assignments	9%	4%
Volleyball	11%	2%
Computer experience	9%	---
OOTW/Wargaming	---	10%
Least valuable experiences ^b		
Volleyball	20%	32%
Poor group dynamics	15%	9%
Dinah message	10%	7%
Tactical Decision Making Module	5%	5%
Installation budget management (PBAC)	7%	5%
VARWARS	10%	---
POTO briefing	5%	---
Recommended changes to CAS3 ^c		
No changes recommended	3%	9%
Shorten the course to six weeks	38%	35%
Course should come earlier in officer's career	---	9%
Increase per diem	10%	---
More time needed to focus on material	10%	12%
Eliminate the course	3%	5%

Note. Percentages reflect the number of Captains listing each item divided by the total number of Captains responding to the question. Dashes indicate that the item was not mentioned by anyone.

^a Percentages are based on the responses of 46 juniors and 48 seniors.

^b Percentages are based on the responses of 41 juniors and 44 seniors.

^c Percentages are based on the responses of 40 juniors and 43 seniors.

Additionally, Operations Other Than War (OOTW) and war gaming were considered valuable experiences by five senior captains but were not listed by any junior captains. Four junior captains listed improved computer skills as a valuable CAS3 experience, but no senior captains mentioned it.

Miscellaneous

One or two students listed each of the following as valuable CAS3 experiences: jump TOCs (Tactical Operations Center), working as part of a staff group, visiting the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks, and having a lieutenant colonel as a mentor. The combined arms concept was also lauded: "Having a small group of twelve people led by a former battalion commander fostered an environment where you could really learn."

Least valuable experiences at CAS3

Volleyball

Respondents varied in their perceptions of the least valuable experiences at CAS3. Several believed that volleyball received too much emphasis in the course. As was stated earlier, junior-senior differences emerged in this area. Nearly twice as many senior than junior captains believed volleyball was one of the least valuable experiences at CAS3 (fourteen senior captains vs. eight junior captains). One senior captain wrote, "Volleyball did little to help the group's interaction. No one wanted to try so the motivation level was ineffective." A junior captain commented, "Volleyball took too much time away from normal PT. It was fun but did nothing physically or in team building that I could gather." In sum, several students maintained that volleyball occupied time that could have been spent in more productive ways.

Group dynamics

Poor group dynamics was a pervasive theme in the comments of both junior and senior captains. One student commented, "Our group dynamics made the process painful at times. We spent more time on projects than we needed to." Another student elaborated: "the success or failure of a course is dependent to a large degree on the teamwork and interaction of the group. Unfortunately, my group never successfully came together, which made a lot of projects and processes painful." Yet another student expressed great cynicism: "How well you liked your buddy weighed more heavily on the minds of this group than an individual's ability to execute the mission!"

Course curriculum

Four junior captains disliked the time spent on VARWARS. One student used VARWARS to illustrate how the staff group often completed a project but did not understand the situation. No senior captains expressed dissatisfaction with VARWARS. Also, four junior and three senior captains considered the Dinah-mite exercise valueless. The students stated that the program is not used by most commands and that they did not learn anything from the experience.

The POTO (Plans Operations Training Officer) brief was stressful for some of the captains. One student wrote that the exercise was too early in the course. The Tactical Decision Making Module was reported to be of little use by two junior and two senior captains. Similarly, installation budget management (PBAC) was not considered worthwhile by three junior and two senior captains. One student wrote, "[The] installation budget management (PBAC) portion of the course focused more on the end result briefing than the PBAC process."

Additionally, a few captains believed the lesson scenarios were outdated. Some captains asserted that the placement of OOTW -- whether it be earlier in the course or in the Officer Advanced Course (OAC) -- should be reviewed. One junior captain complained that inadequate time was given to learn the staff positions. Other negative experiences include the FM 100-5 briefings, PERT diagrams, quantitative class, and peer evaluations and surveys.

Miscellaneous

Students complained that time was used poorly in the last two weeks of the course. One senior captain wrote, "Most officers get a lot of the orders process at the advanced course, and use it extensively during their jobs. I think there is no reason to go over it here." Some captains resented organized PT. One student wrote, "As company grade officers, we should be expected to maintain our own physical fitness." One captain stated that mid-course counseling lacked specificity; another asserted that such counseling comes too late in an officer's career.

Regarding the nature of the course itself, one student lamented about the "lack of ability to think independently and creatively as a leader. There was too much emphasis on process and not enough on content and substance." Another student remarked that it was a challenge to be taken seriously "since I am a triple minority here; female, non-combat arms, and Black."

Recommended changes to CAS3

Four senior captains and one junior captain recommended no changes for CAS3. The remaining captains had a variety of concerns.

Course Length and Placement

The most common recommendation was that the course be shortened. Fifteen of the junior captains (38% of those responding) and fifteen of the senior captains (35% of those responding) recommended shortening the course to six weeks. Most of these students asserted that CAS3 should either directly follow the Advanced Course or be supplanted by it. However, there was disagreement regarding which exercises should be eliminated. Students were equally split between eliminating Phase 1 and dropping the last two weeks. Those in favor of cutting Phase 1 suggested that the problem solving exercises, briefings, and writing assignments typically completed in Phase 1 of CAS3 be added to the advanced courses. CAS3 instructors, in turn, should teach what is not covered in the advanced courses.

Students who recommended eliminating the final two weeks felt that material became repetitious toward the end of the course. As one student stated, "You only need to write so many memos and deliver so many briefings to gain proficiency in these skills." In addition, if programs of instruction were coordinated between OAC and CAS3, duplication between the courses could be avoided.

One junior captain and two senior captains recommended eliminating the course: a senior captain wrote "cancel it altogether -- [it] teaches bad habits, promotes shoddy work, cutting corners, appearance over content, etc." A junior captain suggested cancelling CAS3 and lengthening the Officer Advanced Course by three weeks to include the problem solving process. Both of these individuals belong to the Infantry branch. Two junior captains proposed either moving CAS3 directly after the OAC or incorporating CAS3 into the OAC.

Junior captains

Two junior captains wanted Staff Group leaders to be more understanding of junior captains. Specifically, they requested more time to learn the material and to prepare group projects and more examples and demonstrations in class. One student asserted that having to prepare briefings didn't leave enough time to actually learn the material. Two other captains suggested administering an Academic Evaluation Report (AER) to each student while at CAS3. One captain's rationale is that "some students know that nothing follows them and that's what they put out."

Junior captains also recommended that CAS3 issue computers to students and/or have laptops available in the classrooms. Four students requested an increase in per diem. Regarding the feeding policy, one student remarked, "we are not given the time to travel back and forth between the schoolhouse and the hospital on a daily basis." Three students wanted more class time allotted for homework and major group projects. Additionally, students recommended more emphasis on OOTW and joint doctrine, the inclusion of computer simulations of battle plans, and the inclusion of a CGSC course brief.

Though most students did not comment on the tactical decision module, one captain was very disappointed with this module.

"The entire load of this part of the course falls on the military intelligence and combat arms officers with experience. Two-thirds of the class group spent the last three weeks entirely confused and left out while the people with background rushed to meet deadlines" (original emphasis).

Two junior captains recommended that course instructors be of a lower rank, e.g., major. One student suggested that CAS3 should "get into more branch specifics prior to working together with other branches. I think this would allow much better understanding of the combined arms concept near the end of the course." Students also argued that standardizing staff group instruction would ensure that all staff groups learn the same material. Three students maintained that CAS3 is too stressful. One complained of "the need to spend late nights and nearly all weekends in preparation. Artificially induced stress does not improve cognitive learning processes!" Another student wrote that "Some instructors really discouraged their students. This class should be conducive to learning positively."

Senior captains

A common theme emerging from the senior captain comments was that captains should be sent to CAS3 earlier in their careers. Four captains explicitly stated that the course came too late in their careers. Three of these students recommended integrating CAS3 with OAC or placing CAS3 directly after OAC; the fourth suggested that CAS3 be taken during a captain's second assignment. One senior captain wrote, "Definitely place CAS3 immediately after the Advanced Course. This is great information I could have used three to four years ago." Another student suggested, "[The] course needs to be taught when an officer has five to six years [experience]. Probably not right after the advanced course but during their second assignment." A major dissented:

"Although I came to CAS3 relatively late in my career (major), CAS3 would be far less beneficial if all the attendees had no command experience -- how can you learn to work on Battalion and Division level if they have not worked on the Company level?" (original emphasis).

Senior captains' recommendations for change differed from those of junior captains. Regarding course curriculum, senior students suggested eliminating the tactical decision making module, reducing the number of staff exercises, shortening the OOTW and Krasnovian exercises, and moving the POTO brief to the end of the course. One student wanted more up-to-date scenarios for the Krasnovian exercises, for example, a scenario of Southwest or Southeast Asia. One senior captain recommended that students be taught individual staff officer positions (i.e., S1 through S5). The student wrote, "As CAS3 graduates we are expected to know the staff positions, and the course really didn't cover it."

On a basic level, these students emphasized the need for a better articulation of standards and an updated curriculum. They suggested spreading out the written assignments required for the course and including a block on how technology is changing modern warfare. Other suggestions include using vignettes to teach history, improving the quality of "buff" sheets and "greens", and bettering the ventilation in Bell Hall. Like the junior captains, the senior captains also advocated standardized instruction. The most significant complaint of one senior captain was the quality of laundry and dry cleaning on post.

Several captains, both junior and senior, remarked that they had insufficient time to focus on the material. Two students recommended reducing the number of staff exercises and concentrating on doing fewer exercises thoroughly. One student stated, "Many times actually learning the material was cut very short in order to prepare a briefing." It was also suggested that Staff Group leaders not overlap assignments: "students will only turn in products and won't be concerned about turning in quality work."

Conclusion

One of the primary goals of CAS3 is to bring together Army officers from all branches and have these individuals interact in small groups. This is what is referred to as the combined arms concept. Given that over half of the Captains listed branch interaction as one of their most valuable experiences at CAS3, continued emphasis on the combined arms concept would be beneficial. Nevertheless, the comments of some of the students indicate that these small groups composed of diverse people are not always cohesive.

Since CAS3 recently became a six-week course, the volleyball requirement has been dropped. Given new time constraints, we would expect an increasing number of students to experience a more intense workload and express a need for more time to learn the material. The comments provided in this report may be useful in determining which exercises need more attention and which exercises could be curtailed or eliminated.

Like many Army institutions, CAS3 will be undergoing several changes in the upcoming years. Efforts have begun to synchronize CAS3 with the Officer Advanced Courses such that Captains will attend CAS3 immediately following the Advanced Course, rather than later in their careers as has typically been the case. Research conducted by ARI has shown that junior Captains are no less capable than senior Captains in handling the course load. However, as is evident in the divergent responses of juniors and seniors, these two groups have different needs which must be addressed.