WE'VE GOT TO DO BETTER: DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. How do people learn best? Even before COVID upended academic life, institutions such as the U.S. Army have relied on a combination of distance and residential instruction built on the assumption that with proper safeguards and practices both could be equally effective in communicating information and encouraging excellence. But is that so? Or rather, how can we make sure that that is so? Whether current distance learning practices truly match up to expectations has been a subject of study for **Colonel Geoffrey Bailey**, a member of the U.S. Army War College Class of 2021, who built his strategy research project on an analysis of graduates of five Army career courses. We have invited Colonel Bailey here today to join us on A Better Peace to discuss his research on the subject of distance learning and his thoughts on how the Army can better integrate such distance learning into its training and talent management without losing the benefits that come with other forms of learning as well. Colonel Geoffrey Bailey is a chaplain with almost 30 years of enlisted and commissioned service. He is committed to civilian education, earning a bachelor's from the University of Texas at El Paso and a master's and doctorate from Baylor University. After graduation from the War College, he is heading to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. But for today, we are delighted to have him with us. Welcome to A Better Peace, Colonel Bailey.

Geoffrey Bailey: Good morning, Ron. It's great to be with you this morning. Thank you very much for the invitation to discuss this topic and to discuss really the importance of distance learning as a viable process for educating our officers to ensure that the total Army is ready to face whatever happens under multi-domain operations. If our nation is asked to serve in large-scale combat operations against an adversary, we need to ensure that our officers are properly trained and educated.

RG: You bet. So what brought you specifically to this research topic? What made you concerned about the value and the use of distance education?

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JB: Well, a couple of things brought me to this topic. One of them is for a long time there's always been this give and take and back and forth between traditional brick and mortar or resident education and distance learning with many arguing that residential learning is far superior. And the second was what I observed as I watched a couple of chaplains going through a distance learning career course back in 2012, a chaplain disappeared for two days into an office and came back two days later and said I have completed the entire common core for my career course. And I walked away scratching my head, wondering how productive could that be? And how effective could that be because that's eight weeks' worth of material that you just covered in two days. So in my mind, that threw up a red flag that there's no way there could be equivalency. The other was when I was in the reserve, I had to do a reclassification from one MOS to another MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). And I remember, of course this was in the 90s, I simply received a stack of yellow books in my mailbox, and in those days you went through, you read the material, you took the test in the back, filled out a scantron sheet, mailed it off and then waited, hoping you would achieve 70% or better on each one. Things have changed a lot since then. Technology has changed and then the last one was COVID. COVID provided the perfect catalyst, the perfect opportunity to really ask ourselves and examine and assess: have we achieved learning outcome equivalency between resident learning and distance learning? So those are the questions that kind of brought me to this, that drove me to this topic.

RG: What is the current place… or before COVID because clearly COVID has changed everything… even this recording that we're doing is a form of distance education because we're doing it over an online platform rather than together in a studio. This is all stuff that we've learned just in the past 15 months. But what has been the place of distance learning in Army educational practice? Were career courses primarily distance learning before the age of COVID?

JB: That's a great question. Before COVID the distance learning model for the career course, and I will speak specifically about the Chaplain Corps Career course. We had three models. The first one was a six-month PCS resident course at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The second one was a distance learning version that was two weeks approximately, completely distance learning and then two weeks temporary duty at Fort Jackson in resident. And then the third place was this hybrid version that we created there for a bit because there was a backlog of captains who had not gone through the career course, which was a mix of the one model and the second model. And primarily only COMPO 1 or active-duty personnel went to the six-month resident course, whereas National Guard and Army Reserve went through the second model, which was distance learning with two weeks distance and two weeks residence.

RG: There are a bunch of different things to talk about that we've talked about on podcasts here and we will in the future about the differential treatment of COMPO 1 and COMPO 2 which we might get to now, but if we don't, don't worry. Don't worry, everybody, we'll be talking about that some other time. But this idea that some people are able to do PCS and go to Fort Jackson

and everybody else is supposed to study in Fort Living Room. This is a long-term issue. And of the people that you surveyed, or the surveys that you used for your research, what did they say about their expectations for distance learning? Did they feel as though distance learning was something that they had to do, that they were missing out on a better experience? Or were there advantages to distance learning that people embraced from the beginning?

JB: That was one of the overwhelming responses I received, not only from the resident learners who we surveyed, but also from the distance learners we surveyed. Both groups overwhelmingly said that the distance learning was by no means equivalent with resident learning but there were many things they missed out on. Some of them are the intangibles like the networking and the relationships that are built. The second and the more important one was the ability to comprehend the material, integrate the material into their concept of leadership, their roles and functions as an officer both in providing support as well as simply doing staff operations. In fact, the biggest, largest area where we found discrepancy was on the Common Core Exam. And the Common Core Exam, the reason why I homed in on that was because Common Core material is common across all branches. It doesn't matter whether you are field, artillery, infantry signal, or nurse corps or chaplain, you have to learn that material in order to properly integrate into the Army, speak the proper language and then take your specific branch specialty your expertise and integrate it into a comprehensive plan for the United States Army. And what I saw was resident learners, they scored on average 87% on the Common Core Exam. Distance learners taking that exact same exam averaged 66%. That's a 21% degradation which is troubling, and that's what really made me think.

RG: I could see where that would really make one notice. A 20-point difference when we're considering there are no other internal differences. Everybody is the same. They're all equally qualified folks to be in this career course to begin with. Is that what you're talking about in the paper you refer to, the capability gap? Is that the capability gap that you're referring to?

JB: Absolutely, there's a capability gap, because if that individual doesn't properly understand the material because the educational process has not afforded them the ability to properly comprehend and integrate the material, then what we've essentially done is create educational haves and have nots, which then places it's individual down at a company level, or for chaplains they start at battalion level, but they are working on the staffs and in leadership roles and they don't understand the foundational material they need to know at the company grade level and those deficiencies are only going to follow them or hinder their forward progress from that point on, which is why it is critical that we get this educational process right while understanding that this doesn't say, we shouldn't do distance learning, it says we need to analyze how we do distance learning to ensure there is learning outcome equivalence.

RG: Of the people that you were surveying, assuming that these were surveys, what were the years that these folks had taken these captains courses? Were they all pre-COVID? And related to that, technologically speaking, I guess they had gotten beyond Yellow Books and Scantrons, but had they reached the level of Microsoft Teams and the panoply of technological things that we've started to use in the past year and a half? Or are we talking about folks who were even before the possibility of synchronous distant learning existed?

JB: That's a great question. That was one of the things that we found. The groups I looked at, I looked at two distance learning courses that just graduated here recently and I looked at the three previous resident courses just prior to those and the reason I looked at those because I found 62 students from the resident course and I had 66 students from distance learning courses, so I had approximately equal groups to then sample and survey. I then sent them both the exact same survey and it was an anonymous survey where they had to quantify what they believed their proficiency was in terms of the learning outcomes and the impact of the schoolhouse in developing those efficiencies. And of course, then I looked at their score results. One of the things that came out that you spoke of is the question of synchronous learning platforms like Microsoft Teams or Blackboard or asynchronous delivery. And unfortunately, although we've moved away from the Yellow Book Scantron sheets, the distance learning delivery of curriculum wasn't much better. In fact, the Army, not too long ago, did away with Jeff in the sweater vest for the online cyber security training because it was ineffective. It was check the block and people moved on and they even started dressing up like Jeff the sweater vest for Halloween.

RG: And avoiding and avoiding women named Tina.

JB: Exactly. And that was the challenge. What they didn't do is they didn't properly design the distance learning material to ensure it was effective. And there were three axes of distance learning design that we look at. In fact, many people have realized you actually have to over design distance learning to overcome the geographic distance gap created. So these three axes are really the student curriculum interaction, the student-to-instructor interaction, and what we all agree with and experience in learning is the student-to-student interaction.

RG: It would seem like it's that last one in particular that's the hardest thing to maintain when you're doing distance learning. It's one that the students can interact with the curriculum and they can interact with the instructor, but how do you get them to interact with each other?

JB: Absolutely, in a classroom setting. And luckily, I got to serve at the Chaplain Center School for a while. I was a chief of doctrine and I was in charge of tasks and concepts, but that also meant I got to guest teach. I taught Defense Support of Civil Authorities and I taught Operations Process and I taught Doctrine. Of course, everything we do is rooted in doctrine. And one of the things was great is while I was at the schoolhouse, there were these civilians who were in charge

of educational development of the instructors. And they would push you and test you and help you figure out how to get these students to be in charge of learning outcomes, to interact with each other and to put the learning responsibility on them, but also understand that as they start integrating the material and discussing the material, they are also bringing a wealth of experience with them into that classroom. They're bringing the various assignments they've had, their life experience, their untested biases or unconscious biases and assumptions which classmates will call them on. And that actually exponentially increases the effectiveness of learning outcomes. And in distance learning, there are ways to do this. There are ways to utilize things like Microsoft Teams or Blackboard to have group discussions where the instructor is there as a facilitator and not the sage on a stage.

RG: And so technology will definitely help as you've suggested. I want to come back to that, but a question has been tickling at the back of my mind and I want to ask it. I don't know if your research covers this or not and that is, do we have any sense of the differential career outcomes for those who have participated in these career courses as residential programs versus those who participate in them as distance programs? Or is the fact that basically most residential programs are COMPO 1 and most distance are COMPO 2 mean that there's no way to compare them to each other?

JB: Right now we don't have the differential to compare. And what's interesting is, if we look at Army Regulation 350-1, it specifically talks about the fact that in files and in educational reports there will be no delineation or anything to designate that an individual did it via distance or resident learning. That way there cannot be a bias in a promotion board selection, which is good, and that's one of the biases we need to make sure isn't there, just like removing the photographs and height, weight and gender away from ORBs is going to help us make sure we remove a lot of unconscious biases in the selection process. The challenge we see is really in the competence level of these people when they're working. And what's troubling is primarily this is the model we've used for Reserve and National Guard. And for decades now, we've had active component people disparagingly say that the Reserve and the Guard can't keep up, and I would offer, it's because we've provided them education that is substandard compared to the active component, so it's unfair to then assess somebody against a different standard when the education they received is different.

RG: Right. So that then gets to the question that I started to ask a second ago, which I will now actually ask and that is, is technology going to solve this problem? With greater distance synchronicity, will that make it possible to have more of the kind of interactions that will make it feel more like a residential program and so therefore overcome the alienating aspects of distance learning? That's part one. And part two of that question is, what other reforms do you see need to be put into place in order to close this this capability gap?

JB: I think technology is a great venue and a great means to employ. The challenge is we need to look at the ways in which we are utilizing this tool. It's great to have the tool, but you can't simply take the old method of doing it, put it onto a new technology and say, voila. We have the answer, in fact, right here in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Dickinson College had instructors and professors who tried to transition to online platforms and there were some challenges at the beginning, but they exercised incredible adaptability and flexibility and modified the delivery of the curriculum, and in fact, one of the instructors or professors worked with the department to ship sewing machines out to her students because it was a stage technology classroom. And this way they could still produce the materials and the products they would create in a laboratory or in their lab setting as part of that class and continue to learn from wherever they were in the United States. So that's one of the things we have to look at is how do we actually employ the technology? It's one thing to have an M1 Abrams. It's another thing to know how to use it and stop using Sheridan tactics.

RG: Well then that gets to the question, what are the obstacles that exist to these reforms? I'm going to throw one out because I imagine it's probably there and that is any change to whatever we do right now probably is going to cost more money. But what other obstacles might exist? What do you think is holding us back or what do we need to be aware of that we need to overcome as an Army in order to deal with this capability gap?

JB: Part of dealing with the capability gap is committing to equivalence. This is the starting point. We have to say, yes, we want learning outcome equivalency whether it's resident or distance learning which means we need to give just as much priority to distance learning curriculum development as we do resident learning curriculum development. We need to regularly conduct reviews of the curriculum and ensure that it is staying on par. We need to also conduct surveys of the graduates themselves as well as the commanders they work for because the reality is, commanders are the customers. Commanders are the ones that every schoolhouse provides their graduates to in order to provide ready and trained forces to the Joint Force, which means they're the ones who will tell us whether our training is relevant and effective, and then we go back and modify it. The other thing we need to look at is force structure and dedicate a distance learning division at the schools where the distance learning instructors and facilitators are viewed on par with resident learning instructors because people often think, well if I have a distance learning course, I'm no longer limited to say, 30 students. In fact, I could put 60 people through that course in the same amount of time and I'm going to save money and it's far more effective. Well, that's not accurate, especially if the learning is asynchronous in nature, because what that means is that instructor has to be just as available for those 60 students now and also has to be ready at a moment's notice to answer a question from anywhere in the entire breadth of the curriculum as opposed to that instructor who has taken people step by step from lesson number one to lesson number X. My son was doing distance learning here recently, as everybody has during COVID, and I thought I would not want to be a pre-algebra teacher in an

asynchronous manner because that is complicated, and you have to remember where each student is when they ask a question. And you think of the variety of questions that will come at you from multiple directions rather than if you're in a classroom with everybody doing everything at the same time, you'll get the one question of the one thing that you're talking about, as opposed to everybody coming at you when it when it strikes them that they have a question.

JB: Absolutely. And the one thing that you lose, you don't have that student-to-student interaction where students are helping each other learn the material. In my son's class, when a student was struggling with a concept, a student who understood it well could explain it to them and help them while this teacher was helping another student. So there's this additive feature when you have student-to-student interaction. The other challenge we have that we have to overcome is really, you could call it apathy or ambivalence, this notion that well, COVID-19 is going to be over soon. So this is just temporary, let's go back to the status quo because systems, especially complex adaptive systems like homeostasis, they don't like change. But the reality is Reserve Component, which is comprised of the Army Reserve and the National Guard, comprises 60% of our total Army. We can't go back to normal because we have realized normal wasn't effective and it wasn't working. And we also have to think about the fact we are probably facing the prospect of flat budgets, increased operational demands and the requirement for agile and flexible leaders operating in large scale combat operations under anti-axis and aerial denial where they won't be able to pick up the radio, pick up the phone or get on computer because they might go into periods of communication blackout where they can't talk because as soon as they turn any system on, they've now set up a signature which means now the adversary can target them. So we need leaders who are capable of operating really with autonomy.

RG: And so therefore we need to make sure that all leaders have had training and preparation that is equivalent so that we can rely on them all to be able to do these things.

JB: Absolutely.

RG: Let me ask you then this, as we as we wrap up this conversation. How sanguine are you about the possibility that the research that you've done on these five groups of students, this 128 total students that you have to talk about, is there any appetite in the Army for longer term or continuous survey and study of these students to see whether there are changes over time… for us to even measure the effectiveness of what reforms we are able to put into place? Or is this going to be, there will be some reforms and then we'll go for a while until some other smart chaplain comes to the War College and decides to write his SRP on how we're still not solving this problem?

JB: Well, I think in terms of long-term or longitudinal studies of these particular students, that I don't know if we're looking into that or there's an appetite for that. I think that's definitely

something we should look into. I do know that Training and Doctrine Command, General Funk, has very much developed a sense of urgency among his staff to look into distance learning and ask ourselves, what are we doing properly? What are we not doing properly? What do we need to change? What do we need to retain? And what are the steps we need to take to ensure that distance learning truly demonstrates equivalency? Because we need that for the total force, especially if we're going to be prepared for whatever our next adversary is, wherever that takes place.

RG: Do you foresee having any bandwidth or possibilities of engaging with this topic yourself in the future? Obviously, the Corps of Engineers is going to find things for you to do when you go there, but do you imagine yourself staying engaged in these questions of educational policy going forward?

JB: I absolutely plan on staying engaged in this conversation regarding educational policy, because as senior leaders in the Army, we have responsibility to train and educate those who are coming after us in order to ensure we're ready accomplish what the nation has requested and to defend the homeland. I've been in conversation, of course, in my own branch with people like the Chief of Chaplains and the Deputy Chief of Chaplains, as well as the Commandant and the Director of Training at the Chaplain Center School regarding what we've found here, and they're already starting to relook at our distance learning approach, the curriculum, the programs and instruction. So I have a positive outlook that this is a conversation that's going to continue. It's a conversation that needs to continue because we have to understand that equivalency is possible, but more importantly, equivalency is necessary.

RG: Then let me end with a question, a semi-personal question for you. So as you've reached the end of your year as a student at the U.S. Army War College, how has the experience of essentially being a residential student in a distant era, how has that hybrid experience for you shaped your understanding of the value of the possibilities of distance learning?

JB: You know it's been an interesting year and I joke with some of my friends that if anybody ever asked me, did you go to the resident course or the distance course? I can say, why yes, I did. COVID has created some unique challenges and I have watched, and of course, gone through where some instructors were incredibly adept at utilizing the technology and ensuring that the students were engaged, assessing our learning and preparing us for the exam, or really more importantly, integration of the material to utilize it as leaders leaving the War College to operate at the strategic level. And that's renewed with me and understanding that technology can be leveraged, but we have to be very careful about how we use the technology and ensure that it's achieving the ends which we want to achieve. In fact, my next assignment at the Corps of Engineers, I will be the Command Chaplain of an organization with a mission around the world. And I will be a team of two, myself and my religious affairs specialist. We will need to leverage

technology in order to build trust and provide care for people around the world. So it will be interesting to see how we leverage technology to meet those two objectives as well as then network and build relationships with the Army Reserve and the National Guard across the United States in order to help take care of the Corps of Engineers personnel—an incredible team of professionals—but they need care as well and if I'm going to figure out how to do that, technology is going to be one of those tools I will utilize.

RG: Sure. Well, and it's good to bring lots of capabilities there. I know that among the things the engineers do is they fill in gaps. They build bridges. And hopefully you'll get an opportunity to do some of that. This has been a very interesting discussion. Colonel Geoff Bailey, thank you so much for joining us to talk about distance learning in the Army here on A Better Peace.

JB: Thank you, Ron, and I look forward to watching this conversation continue as the Army commits to distance learning equivalency and developing the right competencies and capabilities at scale across the Army.

RG: Great. Thank you, Colonel Bailey, and thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and on all of our programs and send us suggestions about future programs. We're always eager to hear from you. And please, after you have subscribed to A Better Peace because of course, if you haven't already, you need to subscribe to A Better Peace, please rate and review this podcast on your podcatcher of choice, which helps other potential listeners to find us so that we can continue to grow this community. While this conversation is over, the conversations will continue on A Better Peace and we look forward to welcoming you all back again. But until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.