



For the U.S. Marine Corps, the arena of combat has changed dramatically since the set-piece battlefields of World War II: from formally defined frontlines, clearly recognized enemies, and conventional warfare tactics, to fluid battlefields, elusive opponents, and asymmetric war fighting. This fundamental shift in combat dynamics has in turn changed the way the Corps views and manages its logistics.

Beyond the Iron Mountain: Changing the Face of Marine Corps Logistics

Historically, the Marines have relied on having enormous amounts of equipment and supplies on hand close to the battlefield, thus helping to avoid unforeseen shortages. But by the time of the First Gulf War, this “iron mountain of materiel” logistical model had run its course. According to Lt. Gen. Gary S. McKissock, the Marines’ Deputy Commandant for Installation and Logistics, “It took us some time to get prepared until we were comfortable kicking off a ground assault... a lot of folks gave special kudos to the logistics community. But it was obvious we could have done a lot better.” And so the Marine Corps committed itself to doing better.

PENN STATE’S CUSTOM SOLUTION: MARINE CORPS LOGISTICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Marines took a decisive step in choosing Penn State’s Smeal College of Business to help fulfill its commitment to logistics modernization through education. Smeal offered a custom-designed solution that drew on the expertise of faculty in the College’s Center for Supply Chain Research, Department of Supply Chain and Information Systems, and Executive Programs, as well as that of commercial supply chain leaders. The objective was to study and evaluate proven and emerging commercial and military supply chain management concepts and practices in order to facilitate Marine Corps Logistics Modernization and to increase the effectiveness of Marine Corps and Department of Defense (DoD) logisticians.

In the fall of 1998, thirty Marine Corps logisticians, guided by Smeal professors and invited consultants from private industry, studied best practices in commercial supply chain management. Their combined efforts resulted in a new plan for Marine logistics that reflected the Corps’ rich culture of training, leadership, and innovation: The Marine Corps Logistics Education Program (MCLEP).

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Executive Programs

INNOVATIVE PROGRAM CONTENT, STRUCTURE, AND DELIVERY

At one time, the Marine Corps had more than 200 separate logistics systems. It now has a single web-based IT suite, the Global Combat Support System, for managing all of its logistical processes. GCSS enables both end-to-end visibility and a single view of the Corps' supply, maintenance, and distribution operations. It is compliant with the DoD logistics architecture and is interoperable with the U.S. military's other systems.

MCLEP course content integrated the Global Combat Support System's planning requirement with new and innovative commercial logistics concepts, products, and processes that could be tailored to support the logistics modernization initiative. Each offering emphasized managerial development as an integral part of successful logistics and supply chain management, covering such topics as change leadership in addition to information technology and metrics for success. Participants also benefited from gaining a common view and language around supply chain issues, opportunities, and challenges.

The Marine Corps Logistics Education Program was designed for commanders, executive-level logistics managers and staff at the service, component, joint, and Marine Expeditionary Force levels, and Marine Air-Ground Task Force members operating in a joint environment.

Courses were delivered in two formats: resident and non-resident. The resident MCLEP, held on the University Park Campus of Penn State, was two weeks long and featured lectures, facilitated implication and implementation discussions, and experiential learning through case studies, hands-on exercises, and business simulation exercises, and a field trip to examine first-hand best practices in the commercial sector. The implications discussions sessions, facilitated by the School of Marine Air-Ground Task Force Logistics staff from Marine Corps University, provided the critical link to Marine Corps and DoD issues and concerns.

It also included a major case study exercise completed by teams and culminating in presentations to a mentor panel of senior-level DoD and Marine Corps logistics leaders. Assessed as one of the most valuable portions of the program, the case study required the application of newly learned supply chain management principles. The interaction among team members yielded some of the most enduring learning points.

The non-resident MCLEP was one week long and more condensed, yet like the resident version still featured lectures, facilitated implication and implementation discussions, case studies, and hands-on and business simulation exercises. The non-resident course was designed to be transportable and delivered to Marine Corps personnel worldwide at locations in California, North Carolina, and Japan.

THE PENN STATE EXPERIENCE: APPLIED AND RELEVANT RESULTS

The Marine Corps had one overarching logistical goal: to meet the war fighters' ever-changing requirements for effectiveness on the battlefield. To that end, the Corps realized the need to adopt processes and metrics that value information and speed over mass.

The focus of Marine logistics is now squarely on the materiel readiness of a weapons system and, accordingly, fill rate now takes a back seat to order-ship time and repair-cycle time. The Corps moved from an order-ship model based on ten classes of supplies to the "quad model," which organizes supplies based on their value to mission accomplishment. Goods and services that are mission-critical are purchased and managed differently from those that are not; order-ship time as been cut by up to 50 percent. Maintenance operations, too, have benefited greatly from logistics modernization. Reliability and maintenance are now factored into the acquisition process so that equipment breaks less often and is easier to fix; repair-cycle time has been cut from seven days to one.

The Marine Corps Logistics Education Program has benefited many. Penn State delivered a total of 23 resident and 22 non-resident MCLEP courses, extending enrollments to guest students from the Naval Supply Systems Command, Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), U.S. Transportation Command, and other government agencies and organizations. In all, more than 2,500 Marine Corps, Navy, and civilian logisticians have been MCLEP students.

The U.S. Navy awarded its 2007 Military Logistician of the Year honor to an MCLEP alumnus, Commander Stanley Dobbs. "MCLEP provided me with great instruction that enhanced my abilities to pursue and achieve readiness improvements," Dobbs has remarked, "My Penn State experience was value added in my career portfolio and I am proud to be an alumnus of the program."

"Such education and training," says General Richard L. Kelly, Deputy Commandant, Installations and Logistics for the Marines, "has helped the Corps build a strong cadre of professional logisticians with up-to-the-minute skills who are making logistics modernization a reality."

OTHER SUPPLY CHAIN EDUCATION INITIATIVES FOR DoD

Affiliated with MCLEP is Penn State's Logistics Fellows Program, which places active Corps logisticians at Smeal College for one academic year to take graduate-level supply chain courses while working on a joint project of the university's Center for Supply Chain Research and the Marine Corps Logistics Headquarters.

In addition to Penn State's work with the Marine Corps, other supply chain education initiatives with the Department of Defense have included the Defense Logistics Agency, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army, and U.S. Navy.