

Professional Military Education Way Ahead – Protect, Adapt, Reshape

A robust debate continues, in both print and online formats, regarding the required structure, opportunities, and challenges for professional military education as it evolves to meet the evermore-complex challenges faced in the national security environment. The individual authors are generally well informed and committed to improving the educational process. Such spirited debate is both necessary and healthy, but it is not new. As we move forward shaping our education institutions to maintain relevancy for the individual student, the respective Service, and our Nation, three key factors must be kept in mind. First, much of what transpires in professional military education institutions today is both timeless and academically rigorous. That said, it is not sufficient to rest on our collective laurels and we can improve. Institutions must, and do, continuously adapt to changing geo-strategic and political realities, advancing technologies, senior leader guidance, and doctrine. However, this is not enough. The professional military education community must also periodically reexamine the “contours” of how it does business. Three decades after the Goldwater-Nichols Act and Skelton Panel, and after almost two decades of non-stop Joint warfare, the U.S. military is at one of those junctures.

The spirited debate about professional military education fundamentally rests on two diametrically opposed positions. The first, that institutions would do better if they more closely resembled top-flight civilian academic schools, rests on the foundation of “creating better thinkers,” the belief that minds that are more agile create better leaders as they advance to senior positions of leadership. Indeed, the Services do send some of their “best and brightest” to Ivy League institutions for advanced degrees. However, at its very core, professional military education prepares its students to fight and win our Nation’s war – a lens, through which, civilian schools do not teach. The second position is that institutions would better serve our Nation by focusing on developing staff skills in the officers that attend, a premise that does have some merit as complaints from senior military commanders about the quality of their staff officers have been voiced.

These debates are necessary and healthy and, in the Naval War College’s case, they have raged since 1884, with the pendulum periodically swinging to either extreme, but often searching for a “sweet spot” in the middle ground. This pragmatic position, codified in the OPMEP which states professional military education is designed to “convey a body of professional knowledge and establish the habits of mind essential to the [profession of arms,” should be defended. Despite the well-meaning rhetoric, often from very well-informed authors, no single model will work across the Service schools and National Defense University (NDU) – and any such effort must be vigorously resisted. As they are today, each school must be free to strike the right balance appropriate to their specific Service, students, assigned mission, and key stakeholders – provided they satisfy the stated requirements of Congress and the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Because, in the case of non-NDU institutions, joint professional military education is necessarily delivered through the lens of Service professional military education, the schools have the freedom to allow their faculty to tailor the curricula appropriately and they achieve excellent results. Although rigor has been challenged, numerous studies have validated that the programs of instruction are challenging. Indeed the 2015 Defense Planning Guidance tasked OSD with investigating academic rigor, with the findings showing that “Intellectual Rigor is

Solid,” and “JPME schools are meeting academic standards, and many are developing new ways to think through defense challenges and promote life-long learning.” As a result, the programs of instruction, relying heavily on the case study methodology and, increasingly, on experimental learning, have developed in their graduates adaptive and agile minds capable of critical thought and strategic thinking.

There are “timeless” aspects of the curricula, coursework grounded in the enduring strategic theorists, for example, the programs are not static. They can, and do, adapt to many factors including changing geo-strategic and political realities, advancing technologies, senior leader guidance, and doctrine. For example, over the last two years, in recognition of emergence of two rising/resurgent powers, a return to great power competition, and ever-emerging advanced technologies, the Naval War College has made significant changes to portions of its curriculum. These improvements, including the addition of a weeklong Future Warfighting Symposium, the tripling of cyber in the core course, an increase in the examination of unmanned systems, and an explicit emphasis on increasing our focus on warfighting and lethality have better prepared our students for current and future challenges. The College will continue to adapt moving forward, while seeking to retain those portions of the curriculum that are enduring.

One challenge, however, is maintaining the appropriate balance as “sea currents” shift. While pendulums have shifted over time from “more Service” to “more Joint” and back again, from more topics covered less deeply to more “deep dives” on fewer subjects, from increasing focus on the full JIIM environment to a great focus on the military element of power, one key point must be reinforced. Tactics, techniques, procedures, doctrine, and technology will all change moving forward, in some cases at an ever-increasing rate. The common element for success is the agile and adaptive mind of our military leaders. We must ensure, as we react to these external drivers that we must address, that schools are retain enough space in the curriculum to continually develop the “thinking officer,” who can conceive of multiple approaches to solving a complex problem, then evaluating which has the greatest chance of success.

The U.S. military has evolved greatly since the late 1980s. Simply stated, we are not the Joint Force that was found wanting by the Goldwater-Nichols reforms nor the Skelton Panel. That said, many of the educational and personnel policies that we must contend today with were forged during that era. Following almost two decades of continuous Joint warfare, the time seems right for a hard look at the contours of the Joint educational and officer management system within which we operate. Things as simple as policies related to Host Service military faculty not receiving Joint Duty credit for teaching a Joint curriculum to Joint student body, to things as difficult as seeking Congressional legislative changes to Joint officer management policies and re-conceptualizing how we might deliver and/or combine JPME I and JPME II. An in-depth look at Joint acculturation is also needed. At a time when shortages in certain communities and officer pay grades leave many seats unfilled, how do we ensure we are inculcating every Service’s “voice” into our officer corps?

Finally, one additional issue needs to be addressed. Much has been written, and discussed, about the Services not producing enough “sound strategic thinkers.” Again, this is not a new complaint as it was made after World War I, World War II etc. What the Joint community must fundamentally come to grips with in this regard is whether great strategic thinkers are created or born. Few emerge in any generation. While the schools are very strong in broadly educating large numbers of students to be better critical thinkers who can approach complex problems with a strategic mindset, they are not positioned well to identify and develop the small

numbers of “strategic thinking super stars” at this point. What we can get better at, perhaps following NDU’s nascent efforts, is to help identify those high potential students who can then be nurtured, appropriately detailed, and protected within their Services and the Joint Force.

Based upon the above, there are a number of strategic issues facing professional military education that should be addressed by the Military Education Coordination Council (MECC). First, the MECC should seek final resolution in the awarding of Joint duty credit for Host Service military faculty. At each institution, a Joint faculty teaches a Joint curriculum to a Joint student body. As General Pace wrote in 2005, “joint experience accrues where jointness is applied.” This is an easy win, and one that will enable all institutions to compete for the very best military faculty. Next, the MECC should consider the open examine possibilities for innovative approaches to the delivery of JPME I and JPME II. The Services are challenged right now, and Joint acculturation standards are not being universally met across the force. Such an effort will necessarily require a hard look at things like OPMEP standards, distance education, and the efficacy of shorter programs that allow for an officer’s certification without the full academic experience. Finally, the Joint force needs to stop undervaluing the strategic education being delivered in our Command and Staff and War Colleges today. The Services are developing strategic thinkers capable of solving complicated and complex problems facing us today. To state otherwise undermines the creditability of these institutions. We can, and should, protect what is working, adapt our programs as needed to meet strategic guidance and to incorporate the best emerging educational methodologies, and be willing to ask ourselves hard questions. Simply put, if we were to build a professional military education system from scratch, in the face of the geo-strategic challenges the U.S. faces, would it look like it does today?