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Taking the War Colleges from Good to Great

Richard D. Hooker Jr.

“Our PME systems have to embrace change or risk irrelevance.”

General Martin E. Dempsey

“PME has stagnated, focused more on the accomplishment of mandatory credit at the expense of lethality and ingenuity.”

Secretary James Mattis, *2018 National Defense Strategy*

Scan the literature these days and you will see a welter of commentary about professional military education, most of it focused on the war colleges.¹ The war colleges share many positive virtues and are justly proud of their contributions, but all have areas that can be improved and strengthened. Compared to other professions like law, medicine, and engineering, military professional education lacks the rigor, strict admissions standards, flexible and tailored academic programs, and competition found in the best professional schools. In an increasingly dangerous and complex world, the nation deserves even more from the military leaders our war colleges produce.

The Common Experience

First, it may be useful to describe and understand the war colleges as they are today. Each service has one, and there are two joint war colleges—the National War College and the Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy—grouped under the National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, DC. All have some unique aspects but, in general, the student experience is similar. Each has a 10-month program leading to a master’s degree focused at the strategic level and also confers a joint professional military education (JPME) credential required by law for promotion to general/flag officer rank. Students at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in Norfolk, Virginia, part of National Defense University, as well as the US Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force students at the NATO Defense College in Rome also receive war college credit. Furthermore, selected officers have opportunities for yearlong war college fellowships at think tanks and prestigious universities.

War college students are typically midgrade officers marked out for promotion from the different services as well as a mix of civilian

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1 The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Mitchell Zais in preparing this article.

and international students. Seminars are composed of a dozen or so students and are led and supervised by one or more faculty members. The Socratic method is often used to stimulate discussion and inquiry. Students typically undergo a standard core curriculum augmented by a few electives.

Curricula are strong on classical theory and are fundamentally sound, but not always as current as they might be on topics such as space, cyber, or weapons of mass destruction. All war colleges feature graduation rates at nearly 100 percent. Class rankings and academic performance have no impact on future career prospects. Required reading loads and writing requirements are modest compared to leading civilian institutions, and the workday is short, sometimes ending at midday.

War college faculty are a mix of active duty military personnel and civilians hired on fixed contracts, balanced by interagency civilians detailed from the Department of State, intelligence community, and other governmental agencies. Military faculty members serve as “professors of practice,” bringing recent experience from the field or fleet and ideally modeling what students can aspire to be after graduation. They are usually O-6s, which translates to the rank of colonel in the Army, Air Force, and Marines or captain in the Navy and Coast Guard, who are war college graduates. They often lack the academic credentials of their civilian peers, creating a tiered system dominated by civilians, who write most professional military education critiques. Retired military officers (sometimes with a PhD) make up a third, hybrid faculty with a foot in both camps.

War college civilian faculty members are well-paid and enjoy a faculty-student ratio of a single teacher to three-and-a-half-students, ensuring a comfortable workload. Civilian faculty members often stay for many years, and contract renewal rates are high. Compared to faculty at civilian graduate institutions, there may be less gender and ethnic diversity at the war colleges.² Brilliant young academics are rare, and civilian faculty members in their 60s or even 70s are common. Though some are noted scholars, many war college faculty members do little or no research. War colleges are led by active duty general or flag officers, supported by civilian deans who are often retired military officers with doctorates.

A Better Experience?

When compared to top-quality civilian graduate programs, the most striking difference at the war colleges is in rigor. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey emphasized this point when he rewrote the NDU mission statement in 2011.³ Graduate

2 Joan Johnson-Freese, Ellen Haring, and Marybeth Ulrich, “The Counter-Productive ‘Sea of Sameness’ in PME,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 74 (3rd Quarter 2014): 59.

3 Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *National Defense University Policy*, Chairman of Instruction (CJCSI) 1801.01C (Washington, DC: JCS, September 2011).

students at top civilian colleges progress through a stressful program with high admissions standards. These programs require lengthy papers; frequent, graded presentations; and heavy reading, and they have demanding professors. In general, the war college experience does not. Students in these civilian programs may be significantly younger than war college students, despite the intensity of the programs and the advanced nature of the material covered. Yet the demands placed on them are significantly more stringent.

The approach found in the best civilian graduate schools is mirrored in the service academies. There the competition for admission is among the most demanding in the nation. Cadets and midshipmen are relentlessly graded and rank ordered to determine their future career fields and assignments. Midterm and final examinations as well as lengthy term papers are standard. By any measure, the service academy experience is demanding and marked by rigorously enforced high standards.

These examples share traits with other institutions such as law, business, and engineering schools that provide professional preparation and accreditation. Their acknowledged excellence in education stems from a number of factors, including ample resources, quality faculty, talented administrators, demanding programs, and supportive alumni. But there are at least two other factors that contribute to their excellence.

First, top academic institutions are invariably marked by competition. Quality institutions compete for students, faculty, and resources—and among themselves for academic ranking. Their students compete ferociously for honors designations and PhD program admissions that will mean much in later years. In all walks of life, fair competition encourages excellence and separates high performers from the mean. Second, academic excellence is rooted in incentives. In programs with real rigor, poor performers are weeded out, while top performers can expect more and better opportunities. Linking future opportunities to present performance is ubiquitous in American society. In PME at the war college level, these attributes are weak or not present.⁴

The lack of competition and incentives in the war colleges is all the more remarkable given the professional environment from which their students are drawn. Military officers live and work in a highly competitive up-or-out professional milieu from the time they enter precommissioning programs. Civilian students from government agencies come from similar organizational cultures. Proven performers are rewarded with promotions, awards, and selection for command. Yet at the war college level, students do not really compete with each other, and the colleges have no need to compete among themselves for graduates or resources. Performance, whether strong or poor, has little or no correlation to future assignments, promotion, or command selection.⁵

4 Christopher J. Lamb and Brittany Porro, "Next Steps for Transforming Education at National Defense University," *Joint Force Quarterly* 76 (1st Quarter 2015): 40–47.

5 Joan Johnson-Freese and Kevin P. Kelley, "Meaningful Metrics for Professional Military Education," *Joint Force Quarterly* 84 (1st Quarter 2017): 65–71.

Contemporary Complications

Defenders of the current system sometimes argue the war colleges are schools of practice—in a sense, trade schools—and thus should not be held to high academic standards.⁶ Through the 1980s, for example, war colleges did not confer academic degrees. Today, however, all students receive an accredited civilian master's degree. Accordingly, the principles of academic selection, competition, and merit seem just as applicable to senior practitioners of the military profession as they are to the legal, medical, and engineering professions to which the military compares itself. The growing intersection between purely military affairs on the one hand and political economy, technology, international law, and diplomacy on the other suggests the comparison is not spurious and the institutional processes that support excellence in other professional schools should apply equally to the war colleges.

A complicating factor is that the war colleges have little control over admissions. From one point of view, military students are of uniformly high quality in that most will be promoted to colonel or equivalent, and virtually all generals and admirals will come from their ranks. By definition, this represents a significant quality cut. From another point of view, students are selected for attendance by their service or agency without regard for academic qualifications other than a bachelor's degree, which might vary widely in quality. Most students will not become general or flag officers.

A typical war college seminar may include an air force fighter pilot, a navy submariner, an army tank officer, and a marine infantryman—fields from which the great majority of future general or flag officers will be drawn. But it might also include a personnel officer, nurse, military lawyer, chaplain, and acquisitions officer. These professional backgrounds differ substantially. Academic backgrounds also vary widely, from Ivy League and service academy graduates with master's degrees already in hand to graduates of third-tier colleges who have not been in a classroom for decades. This wide variety forces the war colleges to teach to a mean that does not challenge top students and militates against order-of-merit rankings, since some students are clearly disadvantaged academically from the outset. In fact, “Students who were unlikely candidates for graduate study in the first place will pass with good grades alongside their more exceptional colleagues, with little distinction between their final records.”⁷ In particular, meeting the aspiration to produce well-educated and capable senior leaders is hindered by the lack of an academic baseline from which to begin.

Another complication is while the war colleges describe themselves as strategy schools, most students will never be strategists. Many are disqualified by their career specialty. Lawyers, medical officers, chaplains, weather officers, personnel officers, and many others who

6 Johnson-Freese and Kelley, “Meaningful Metrics.”

7 Joan Johnson-Freese, “The Reform of Military Education: Twenty-Five Years Later,” *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 148.

regularly attend the war colleges will never serve in a strategist position or professionally apply a curriculum heavy on Thucydides, Machiavelli, Jomini, or Clausewitz. Most war college students will not be promoted past the rank of O-6 and have only a few years remaining before retirement. It is certainly true that tactical or operational excellence is probably enough for most officers. But the relative few who will become service chiefs, combatant commanders, or senior strategists (such as two- and three-star directors for strategy, plans, and policy) must operate as true strategists at a very challenging political-military interface. The colonels and one-stars who support them must be strategists as well.

The foregoing suggests multiple tracks offering a more flexible approach are better suited to the existing war college student population and will better serve the interagency and joint warfighting communities.⁸ Student choice, based on background, interests, and future career aspirations also accords better with midcareer adult learning as described in the current literature.⁹

As some have pointed out, comparing war colleges to civilian institutions is not a perfect fit.¹⁰ War colleges have a specific purpose, somewhat different from other graduate institutions, which accounts for their hybrid governance structures among other variations. Nevertheless, they are graduate academic institutions accredited by civilian bodies and organized along traditional academic lines. They award approved civilian graduate degrees, and participate fully in broader academic consortia alongside civilian counterparts. War college faculty members frequently cite civilian institutions as models when arguing for academic tenure and greater control over curricula. Though there are differences, there are many similarities. The contention that the differences should somehow excuse a lack of rigor therefore seems a stretch.

Relatedly, the literature on JPME often makes reference to a supposed anti-intellectual bias on the part of senior military leaders that accounts for the lack of rigor in the war colleges.¹¹ One study of promotion and command selection boards across 13 years even concluded officers with higher cognitive or intellectual abilities were significantly disadvantaged.¹² At the top, officers with superior academic qualifications—such as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Rear Admiral William James Crowe Jr., former Supreme Allied Commander Admiral James G. Stavridis, former Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General Robert H. Foglesong, former Commander US Central Command General David

8 Patrick M. Cronin, "A Strategic Education: The Ends and Means of the Intellectual Battlespace," *Marine Corps Gazette* 94, no. 6 (June 2010): 10.

9 Michael A. Beiter, "Midlife Adults in Self-Directed Learning: A Heuristic Study in Progress," in *Expanding Horizons in Self-Directed Learning*, ed. Huey B. Long (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1997).

10 George E. Reed, "The Pen and the Sword: Faculty Management Challenges in the Mixed Cultural Environment of a War College," *Joint Force Quarterly* 72 (1st Quarter 2014): 15.

11 Reed, "Pen and the Sword," 15; and Johnson-Freese, Haring, and Ulrich, "Counter-Productive," 148.

12 Everett S. P. Spain, J. D. Mohundro, and Bernard B. Banks, "Intellectual Capital: A Case for Cultural Change," *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 83–84.

Petraeus, former National Security Adviser Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, and former National Security Adviser Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, all of whom hold PhDs—do exist. Still, it is clear, tactical and operational experience and successful service with higher-level staffs carry far more weight than academic achievement. Officers noted for their intellectual accomplishments, even when accompanied by extensive and successful service in the field or with the fleet, can be suspect if for no other reason than they are outliers from the norm. Though tactical and operational excellence are, and should be, requirements for future success, demonstrated intellectual capacity at the strategic level should also be necessary for our most senior leaders.

Modernizing or transforming JPME is wrenching and hard. Proposals to modernize or transform the war colleges typically excite strong opposition from entrenched faculties. Yet momentum continues to build as the field evolves and as the conduct of war transforms. Ideally, moving from good to great at the war colleges would involve retaining what is best and improving the rest. If so, what can be done to make good institutions even better?

Recommendations

Despite the blunt assessment of PME in the *2018 National Defense Strategy*, our war colleges offer invaluable opportunities to network and learn from peers—a year set aside for reflection, professional development, and personal growth; fundamentally sound core curricula; varied and cutting-edge elective offerings; individual attention from professors and mentors; and superb facilities and campus settings. Every war college also boasts some outstanding teachers and scholars. Unquestionably, the war college year provides valuable learning experiences at an optimum point along the military officer’s career timeline. Building on these positive aspects, here are some steps that can take the war colleges to the next level of excellence.

The pool of war college students is a good place to start. Military students are typically selected on the basis of performance as staff officers and commanders, generally without reference to academic preparation. Some have proposed altering the student pool by granting greater admissions control to war college staff and faculty. This would undoubtedly enable a better student baseline, but face opposition from service personnel managers. Noted academics have suggested restricting resident attendance at war colleges to those officers who pass a qualifying examination.¹³ An alternative is a diagnostic examination upon entry to determine placement in different tracks based on prior academic preparation, student interest, and likely future assignments as well as potential for promotion to general/flag officer.

13 Williamson Murray, “Transformation and Professional Military Education: Past as Prologue to the Future,” in *National Security Challenges for the Future*, ed. Williamson Murray (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 14–15.

The National Defense University's Joint Education Transformation Initiative, undertaken at Dempsey's behest, attempted to do just that in 2014.¹⁴ Early versions suggested at least three tracks for war college students based on their interests, backgrounds, and potential: a standard war college track, a more challenging graduate program requiring a thesis, and for a select few, an honors or PhD program. But faculty resistance successfully blunted these proposals and NDU war colleges remain, at least for now, substantially unchanged. To achieve real progress in this direction, strong and sustained support not only from the chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff but also from the Department of Defense and congressional oversight committees will likely be needed. To quote Robert H. Scales, former commandant of the US Army War College, "Real PME reform can only happen through the blunt instrument of legislative action."¹⁵

Applying some of the same principles that we see in the service academies and civilian graduate programs could also produce more qualified and capable war college graduates. Class rankings that are entered on transcripts and in academic efficiency reports represent a first step in the direction of rigor. Tying war college performance to future selection for assignment, command, and promotion would be an even larger step. Even modest attrition in war college graduate programs would signal greater emphasis on serious preparation for higher-level responsibilities in the military profession. As an approximate benchmark, law school academic attrition rates (defined as disenrollment for not meeting academic standards) averaged 6.46 percent in 2016–17, according to the American Bar Association. Law students, of course, are subjected to stiff admissions requirements. Testing by examination, analogous to the comprehensive examinations required in civilian graduate programs, for admissions, program placement, and graduation would go far to determine the exceptional performers we need to defend the nation going forward. All of these will meet resistance, yet all rest comfortably within the norms of academe.

Every war college faculty boasts some superb professors who would stand out at any institution. But in general, the war colleges are not ranked among the very best for the excellence of their faculties.¹⁶ While most military faculty are O-6s—and war college graduates—almost none will be selected for promotion to general/flag officer. In this sense, the military services are "voting" for less-than-stellar programs by not sending a proportional number of their best to JPME institutions. Military faculty members are overwhelmingly successful, hardworking, and conscientious officers devoted to their work. But their selection as military faculty indicates they are out of the running for advancement.¹⁷

14 Gregg F. Martin and John W. Yaeger, "Break Out: A Plan for Better Equipping the Nation's Future Strategic Leaders," *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2nd Quarter 2014): 39–43.

15 Robert H. Scales, "Too Busy to Learn," *Proceedings* 136, no. 2 (February 2010): 5.

16 Johnson-Freese, Haring, and Ulrich, "Counter-Productive," 145–46.

17 Murray, "Transformation," 12.

Though this has been the norm for many years, at one time our staff and war college faculties provided the seed for the most senior ranks. During World War II, for example, 31 of the 35 most successful corps commanders had previously taught in a service school.¹⁸ If JPME is as important as we believe, a move in this direction would send a strong signal.

For their part, while some civilian war college professors enjoy national reputations in their fields, most do not, and others actively eschew scholarship as a distraction from the teaching mission. This dilemma deserves a more in-depth discussion. The war colleges typically offer attractive six-figure salaries compared to a national average of \$64,000 for other full-time social science faculty with comfortable workloads. Furthermore, NDU has de facto tenure with a 90 percent contract renewal rate compared to 24 percent of civilian faculty who were tenured in 2003.¹⁹ Opportunities to conduct research are ample. Classroom sizes are small and administrative requirements, despite occasional grumbling, are less than those at counterpart civilian institutions. What then is the problem?

The answer is probably that the academic aspirations and reputations of the war colleges are somewhat lower than leading civilian graduate schools, and the very best academic talent is therefore not drawn to them.²⁰ War colleges modeled on top graduate schools would probably draw top academic talent. An infusion of younger and midcareer academic talent, to complement experienced military and civilian practitioners would bring innovation and fresh insights to war college faculties that could use them. But first, academic standards should be raised to approximate the best professional institutions. This would likely attract top faculty.

One further point may warrant discussion. The Socratic method described above has become an article of faith at all war colleges, and it has much to offer. What it does not do particularly well is require emerging senior leaders to address and solve complex problems under pressure. The importance of this trait for senior leaders was communicated to Congress in 2010 in the regard that some commanders “consider[ed] their staff officers lacking in certain critical abilities necessary to perform their jobs effectively.”²¹

Solving complex problems was once the hallmark of the American JPME system, nowhere more so than the US Naval War College before World War II. There the faculty and student body worked out most

18 Scales, “Too Busy to Learn,” 2; and David W. Barno et al., *Building Better Generals* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2013), 21.

19 US Department of Labor, 2017; Mark Purcell, “‘Skilled, Cheap, and Desperate’: Non-Tenure-Track Faculty and the Delusion of Meritocracy,” *Antipode* 39, no. 1 (2007): 121–43; Robin Wilson, “Tenure, RIP: What the Vanishing Status Means for the Future of Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 4, 2010; and American Association of University Professors, 2016.

20 Reed, “Pen and Sword,” 16.

21 Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, *Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Two Decades after the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel* (Washington, DC: House Committee on Armed Services, April 2010), xiv.

of the technical and doctrinal innovations that led to victory in the Pacific Ocean.²² War college commandants and deans must continue to strengthen the simulation, war gaming, and exercise components of their curricula accordingly, with special emphasis on individual assessment by senior mentors. Done correctly, this approach could complement the seminar environment nicely.

Concluding Thoughts

The intent here is to provide a friendly critique of our war colleges, which are national treasures with much to be proud of. Even so, national security is a harsh business. Virtually every major military decision in time of war will be made by a war college graduate. The quality of those decisions will be measured by victory or defeat and by dead and wounded. In few other professions, perhaps none, is the need for highly skilled practitioners so clear. If so, the standards for graduation from our most senior military schools should be demanding and exacting. If the profession of arms is a true profession, then it should approach its professional education, certification, and credentialing accordingly.

This logic argues against an industrial age, one-size-fits-all war college where every student follows the same track to guaranteed success. One need only read the memoirs of former general and later President Dwight D. Eisenhower and other military giants of his generation to see how exclusive our staff and war colleges used to be, how intense the competition was, and how useful these experiences were to their future success. They were laboratories for world war, and because of them, despite the military poverty and scant resources that existed in the interwar period, the United States was able to field a cohort of extraordinary senior military leaders that enabled victory.

In closing, the following comment from a respected scholar with serious credentials in both JPME and civilian settings puts it well:

Actually . . . I wouldn't choose between the two at all—I'd build an institution that combines the best attributes of both. I'd pull together the selfless loyalty, discipline, devotion to service, and teamwork of PME along with the academic freedom, rigor, respect for scholarship, and job security of civilian academe. Then I'd recruit the best military and civilian faculty and students I could find to run and participate in it.²³

As our security environment increases in complexity, the best possible investment we can make is in leader development. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has made this clear. The war colleges today provide a valuable and important service to the nation. They are ideal platforms to take senior-leader development to the next level. These suggestions hopefully contribute to that end.

²² Murray, "Transformation," 4.

²³ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "National Security Education: A User's Manual," War on the Rocks, June 17, 2014.