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Making the War Colleges Better

Richard A. Lacquement Jr.

No surprise. I am a big fan of war colleges . . . particularly the US Army War College (USAWC). The United States needs war colleges, all six and then some, to develop national security—especially military—expertise to serve US interests and values. All the war colleges are joint. But to the extent they differ, each has a comparative advantage our joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational endeavors need.

More precisely, the separate war colleges represent specialized Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, economic, and national policy expertise while promulgating common joint elements. In typical US military manner, this joint-but-not-unified approach to senior-service war college education leads to healthy competition. In some regards, such an approach is not efficient (like jointness itself). But effectiveness is the more important standard for analyzing war colleges.

War colleges make exceptional contributions to American national security through the leaders and ideas they produce. We should strengthen war colleges' effectiveness through improvements to faculty, curriculum, and outreach. We must pursue improvements to the broader framework of talent management affecting how we select and prepare faculty and students as well as managing how faculty members and graduates subsequently serve society. My aspiration is that dialogue will advance war college endeavors, with close attention to the dynamic international security environment.

This article has three main components. The first lays out the argument for war colleges, emphasizing answers developed at the USAWC regarding what we think it takes to effectively meet American society's security needs. The second picks up the challenge from Hooker about "Taking the War Colleges from Good to Great," a useful, somewhat incomplete, and sometimes off-the-mark contribution in which I find more to laud than criticize. The third and final section offers additional recommendations toward making war colleges better.

Mission and Structure: The Why and How of War Colleges

Let us put the war colleges in context before focusing on how to improve them. The mission of war colleges is to educate and develop senior leaders for service in high-level national security assignments. War colleges are professional schools situated within an extensive ecosystem of professional military education (PME). Each was created by one of

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the US government's military departments to meet vital professional needs, and they are funded and staffed for parochial but society-focused reasons.

The Navy Department established the Naval War College in 1884. The War Department established the USAWC in 1901, and the Industrial College of the Army Forces—now the Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy—in 1924. General Eisenhower, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, established the National War College in 1946. The War Department established the Air War College in 1946, and the Marine Corps established Marine Corps University in 1991. Their missions, as with their parent organizations, aim to serve the American people—their ultimate clients.

These six war colleges are not the only source for senior-level military education. There are a handful of smaller programs that provide joint senior-level education required for promotion to US military general/flag officer ranks. The US Army also has a program for selected officers to participate in fellowships for senior education that do not result in joint professional military education (JPME) credit. To be eligible for promotion to general/flag officer, USAWC Fellows must attain JPME II credentials, most commonly through a 10-week program at the Joint Forces Staff College.

Unlike most civilian academic institutions, war colleges are not structured to compete for students and measure value in an open employment market. Rather than enticing students to choose a school to develop skills for future employment, war colleges start with students who are already established professionals within the organizations that fund and populate the schools. As such, the students are not the clients. Rather, the students embody the expert talent PME programs further develop to meet the needs of society—the true client.

War college personnel, facilities, and other resources come primarily from tax dollars via the Department of Defense (DoD) budget. Consequently, war colleges are guided by professional obligations to society's national security needs rather than the needs of individual students or other market or business demands. This is a significant point in that it affects almost everything about the manner in which policies govern faculty, students, and curricula.

War colleges focus on the expert knowledge professionals require for established military jurisdictions of practice—such as war, deterrence, stability operations, and support to civil authorities, among others—and adjudicate new jurisdictions such as cyber and space. Academic rigor promulgates professional expertise. But the programs are not primarily academic. With a step or two of logic, however, we may confidently state students attend war college due to our society's national security requirements.

Befitting professional schools, faculty predominantly come from national security community backgrounds. Faculties include active and retired military and civilian national security professionals and are

supplemented by civilians with academic credentials in related fields of study, such as political science, especially the subfields of security studies, foreign policy, American politics, and regional studies; history, especially military; psychology, especially leadership; and business management, especially resource and human capital management.

The preponderance of students are senior-level military officers—primarily grades O-5 and O-6. War colleges include similarly high-ranking military officers from allied or partner nations, and senior civilians from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and other organizations in the Department of Defense. Other national security professionals from non-DoD executive departments, most prominently the Department of State, intelligence community, and Department of Homeland Security, also attend. The US, allied, or partner-nation governments pay for their senior professionals to attend war colleges. Students do not pay tuition to attend. To the degree students incur a personal cost, it is commonly in terms of additional time they must serve their organizations subsequent to attendance. In the Army, for example, this amounts to an additional year of active-duty service obligation.

Student selection, which is typically competitive, is primarily a function of each organizations' personnel systems and policies. In the competitive up-or-out world of US Army officers, thousands of officers are assessed as lieutenants. About 16 years later, less than 15 percent are competitively selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel (O-5), the most junior rank at which an officer may be competitively selected for war college attendance. By about 22 years, less than five percent of that initial cohort earn promotion to colonel (O-6).

The war colleges have a dual nature. They produce both leaders and ideas. War colleges do not promulgate a fixed, unchanging body of knowledge merely to be mastered and applied. Yes, there are many lessons, insights, frameworks, rules, theories, doctrine, and readily applicable techniques that guide war college graduates' discretionary judgment. But no, war colleges have not solved national security equations once and for all. Moreover, the equations themselves shift as some variables decline in significance, although very few disappear completely, and new variables emerge. The vast number of variables relevant to professional judgment create a premium for generalists to serve at the apex of their professions without discounting essential contributions of specialization among and within organizations.

The priority of the three important factors contributing to the mission of war colleges is faculty, curriculum, and then outreach. But all three are indispensable to success and none can be neglected. The faculty is the center of gravity for understanding the needs of the national security profession, identifying and developing appropriate expertise, and promulgating this expertise through the education and development of future leaders. The faculty and staff work closely with stakeholders who represent society, primarily within the executive and legislative branches of government but also at the state level.

The curriculum represents the body of expert knowledge that rising national security professionals must master to meet their responsibilities to society. The curriculum is a living body of expertise. Faculty and students have a responsibility to learn and master that expertise and challenge, research, and innovate to ensure expertise remains relevant to society's interests and values within a dynamic security environment.

The third is outreach. Students and faculty must stay connected with those they serve. It is important for war college students, staff, and faculty to understand the strategic environment and its challenges. Faculty and students engage in outreach to provide insights, perspectives, and recommendations to shape policy and strategy.

The war colleges are not the only institutions that provide national security education. Within the Department of Defense, the Naval Post-graduate School, the Air Force Institute of Technology, and some other DoD education and development institutions also provide joint education at the senior level. But no major counterpart to DoD education and development exists elsewhere in the executive branch. The State Department, for example, has some educational programs for midcareer professionals but nothing as extensive as JPME.

The civilian academic community also has an array of academic programs that provide education, and some development, relevant to the national security establishment. Public policy programs and business schools may address academic topics relevant to national security professionals. But these programs are not sufficient for society's national security needs.

High-quality public policy schools, such as Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, offer wonderful graduate programs that predominantly support the development and certification of junior students who aspire to become professionals in the public service realm, including the national security community. Business schools, such as the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, provide valuable complementary programs that deal with large enterprises in the market-driven economy. Yet both public policy and business schools typically cater to individual student customers.

The Challenge: "Taking the War Colleges from Good to Great"

Hooker's welcome addition to the literature is a praiseworthy, thoughtful analysis. I strongly agree with the overall theme and the spirit behind Hooker's recommendations to make war colleges better. Furthermore, the categories he concentrates on—students, faculty, and curriculum—are important. I also agree the focus must be on what the nation and its taxpayers deserve.

The author provides helpful suggestions—greater attention to war college faculty assignments and composition; strengthening faculty teaching, scholarship, and service; greater attentiveness to student selection; better tailoring war college opportunities to accord with

student and organizational demands; and continued attention to war college curricular rigor and scope, including how to keep pace with key contemporary challenges. I also endorse Hooker's implicit point that academic and professional standards are complementary. On the other hand, I find his focus on academic rather than professional standards unbalanced.

My strongest critique is that Hooker introduces major distortions by emphasizing academic over professional standards. Academic and professional standards are not mutually exclusive. But the distinction is important. Part of the problem is Hooker unduly focuses on unspecified civilian academic programs as the primary comparison for war colleges. Generally he tends to focus on the master's degrees war colleges award in drawing comparisons to civilian programs.

This comparison between civilian and military education is inapt for two main reasons. First, even when comparing war college curricula with other civilian professional programs such as business, law, medicine, and public policy, a salient difference exists in the nature of the body of knowledge such programs impart to their professionals. Most professional schools focus on a well-defined, specialized body of knowledge within which the judgment of professionals is delimited—medical professionals and health, legal professionals and law, business professionals and profits. Such programs focus on specialization.

For the military, the development of senior professionals focuses on a broader and more general body of knowledge encompassing a wide array of human dynamics and fundamental threats to life and security in a context of actual or potential violence. The closest parallel to war colleges may be public policy schools that weave interdisciplinary economics, governance, and politics. These may have been the schools Hooker had in mind—but he should be specific. Military services have long included such schools as part of professional development pathways. I graduated from one myself, and I know many other war college faculty members—civilian and military—who are products of such programs.

Second, with few exceptions, civilian graduate programs are designed for students seeking basic professional qualifications (law school as a means to practice law, medical schools as the means to practice medicine). The same is generally true of business and public policy schools where the preponderance of students are in the entry or early stages of professional careers, and these schools serve as venues to develop basic expertise for careers of practice. Nevertheless, there is sometimes a parallel between war colleges and business or public policy schools when the latter provide programs for midcareer professionals. A more appropriate comparison is likely that of war college graduation rates and retention with such midcareer master's programs rather than with either undergraduate- or entry- level professional graduate schooling.

Several points in the article beg for correction or clarification.

Among the minor points in need of correction or elaboration are assertions about jointness, program length, competitive selection,

academic standards, elective choices, the value of war college experience to future student and faculty assignments, and one-size-fits-all characterizations.

To start with, all war colleges are joint—not just National and Eisenhower. For the services, JPME credit may not be the predominant focus, but it is a statutory requirement as it is for National Defense University programs. Hooker also only references the 10-month programs common to resident education across war colleges and fails to recognize the nature, structure, and contributions of distance programs, such as those at the Naval War College, Air War College, Joint Forces Staff College, and the Army War College that support a substantial population of reserve component students associated with the federal reserves and National Guard. Furthermore, although not necessarily available to all distance students, a substantial subset of students in the Army War College's 2-year distance education program also earn JPME II qualifications and a master's degree—just like students in the resident program.

The assertion students do not compete for admission to war colleges is only partly accurate. True, there are no individual application requirements similar to military service academies or typical civilian undergraduate and graduate programs. Conceptually, such programs differ from war colleges as gatekeepers to particular professions. In contrast, war colleges focus on developing and educating seasoned professionals for additional responsibilities. The dominance of professional, organizational imperatives in the war colleges' missions have few parallels to civilian programs.

As noted earlier, in a broader context, war college students do compete for attendance. The competition for war college student selection is institutional. The services typically compare performance and potential across officers' entire careers when deciding who to select for war college attendance. For the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps, the selection is centralized. For all students, selection for attendance is made by organizations or countries to which student quotas have been allocated. Prerequisites of rank (O-5 or O-6) and the possession of a bachelor's degree mark a high baseline for the quality of the student body.

I find the assertion about war colleges not meeting academic standards puzzling. As Hooker points out, the master's degrees war colleges award are accredited by the same regional accreditation bodies as civilian graduate schools. Further, all war colleges must continue to meet civilian graduate degree standards to retain accreditation, just as the USAWC did in 2019 to fulfill the Middle States Commission on Higher Education requirements for eight more years of accreditation.

The claim war colleges fail to accommodate student choice also seems off the mark. True, the interests of the organizations selecting midcareer professionals for war college attendance dominate. And selections are governed by a quota, particularly among the military

services, to ensure all war college student bodies have an appropriately joint, interagency, and multinational character. But for many individuals, personal preference is a major factor. Talent management opportunities include the choice of which war college an individual attends.

Once students arrive at a war college, they have many other choices. And each war college has dynamics to reconcile such student choice with institutional requirements. All offer elective courses as part of their educational programs. At the USAWC, in addition to electives, there are several special programs subject to competitive selection in which more than a quarter of students participate. Although the core curriculum demands the majority of students' time, we have found several ways to tailor each educational experience. We intend to expand such opportunities in coming years.

Major offerings include the Carlisle Scholars Program (defense research and writing); the Advanced Strategic Art Program (national-level military policy, strategy, and campaigning); the National Security Policy Program (the nexus of national security policy and strategy development); the Advanced Defense Management Program (DoD resources management); the Joint Land Air Sea Space exercise (JLASS-EX) that culminates with a war game involving students from several war colleges; the Futures seminar that supports the Army's deep futures wargame (Unified Quest); and the Eisenhower Series College Program (an array of high-quality national security engagements around the country).

I disagree with Hooker's assertion that student performance at a war college does not matter. Nevertheless, I am aware of the broader conventional wisdom that a competitive selection to war college is more important than attendance itself. But I do not think conventional wisdom holds up across the board. Related to this, the claim that class rankings are not used on transcripts and evaluation reports is not true for all war colleges.

At the USAWC, class ranking has been part of both the resident and distance programs since 2013. Our current system, aligned with recent changes to the Army's official academic evaluation report, identifies the distinguished graduates—the top 10 percent—and superior graduates—the next highest 20 percent of the class. The academic evaluation report is the official rating entered into an Army officer's personnel file upon completion of a major academic program. The new version of the form for USAWC attendees includes a section that requires a rank-ordered forced distribution designation (distinguished graduate, superior graduate, graduate) in a very similar fashion to the forced distribution selections on an Army officer evaluation report. The Naval War College has also identified class ranking—the top 5 percent graduate with highest distinction and the next 15 percent with distinction.

The claim that war college performance has no impact on an individual's future career is hard to confirm. As one input among many in a typical individual's career file, I suspect the real answer is

idiosyncratic by organization. My observation of student interest and attention to overall war college academic distinction and other honors, writing awards for example, suggests students themselves often perceive such distinctions as valuable for enhancing their career prospects.

The Army academic evaluation report, in addition to noting distinguished and superior performance, allows recognition of focused work in areas of concentration, such as regional studies and special programs, and provides space for narrative comments on awards and other accomplishments. What difference do such items make to boards and assignment officers? I have plenty of anecdotal evidence such information has been perceived as important. I can attest to efforts at the USAWC that have influenced officer assignments (most often for US Army officers) based on student performance at the college. Establishing better fidelity appears to require further study. But a blanket dismissal strikes me as off the mark.

Regarding faculty, Hooker makes a statement I have heard often that may capture a partial truth. He cites evidence that “almost [no faculty] will be selected for promotion” and asserts services do not value war colleges. Again, lore and conventional wisdom, whatever the original source, may capture some truth. But this is a question that begs for a baseline. Let us start with the obvious fact many war college military and civilian faculty are already senior leaders. Colonels and Navy captains (O-6s) are senior ranks. Many State Department faculty hold one- and two-star equivalent ranks of counselor or minister counselor. Active and retired members of the senior executive service—general/flag officer equivalents—are also well-represented among war college faculty. Turning to nongovernment civilian faculty, war college faculty exhibit profiles of rather remarkable senior professionals.

As to the matter of promotion after a faculty assignment, I believe more research might be in order. What number would constitute more than “almost none”? I have personal experience within the past eight years with five US Army general officers who served as war college faculty (Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson and Brigadier General Patrick J. Donahoe at the Naval War College as well as Brigadier General Brian Cashman, Brigadier General Susie S. Kuilan, and Major General Gregg F. Martin at the Army War College).

Nevertheless, I agree with the more general point that service on a war college faculty should be more career enhancing. Services would do well to think of war college faculty as a “second graduating class” deserving greater consideration for future promotion and assignments. This approach would be in line with how duty as a service academy instructor can have beneficial results and in line with positive examples of general/flag officers in World War II who had faculty experience before that war.

Regarding the national standing of civilian war college professors, I again challenge Hooker to be more rigorous. My anecdotal evidence suggests very impressive junior scholars exist across the PME enterprise.

Of course, given war colleges are primarily schools of professional education and practice, dismissing senior practical experience of both civilian and uniformed faculty seems inappropriate. Many civilian faculty are widely respected in senior government circles—the primary audience for the war colleges' graduates and ideas.

The “industrial age, one-size-fits-all” critique appears to be a strawman that falls apart with just a quick glance across the literature Hooker cites, and a brief read into each of the war college's programs. The six war colleges are certainly not cookie cutter replicas of each other, and they do not all follow the same developmental models. As pointed out earlier, they represent many healthy competitive features of jointness itself.

I have visited, attended, or studied several civilian public policy programs—the closest civilian counterparts to war colleges—and the war colleges compare favorably. Both sets of programs are very much of the current age and confront the challenges of information, of technology, and of intertwined, interdisciplinary subjects that make war and other major governance issues such wicked problems. Maybe it is just me, but the industrial age metaphor does not resonate.

I found another minor point confusing if not inaccurate: one of the first endnotes states, “Civilian faculty members write most PME critiques.” My quick tally of sources cited by Hooker in the body and notes of the article yields a heavy majority of individuals I would categorize as military or military faculty, including epigraphs at the start of the article from retired Army General Martin Dempsey and retired Marine Corps General James Mattis. Personally, I find it appropriate and healthy that military professionals are active in critiquing and challenging professional military education.

Some other minor points beg for clarity. I concur with Hooker's call to consider better ways to build experiential learning such as increased simulation, war gaming, and exercises into war college curriculum. But he does so without evidence or baseline as to what is already happening. I am familiar with evidence, especially at the USAWC, that reflects increased experiential learning through staff rides, war games, simulations, case studies, exercises, and a variety of roll-playing activities. I have heard and read passionate pleas for greater attention to certain techniques—such as the use of board games, strategy exercises, and decision-forcing case studies—that helpfully contribute to debates over how to invest our students' educational time. But the debate is a broader one that constantly seeks to balance myriad techniques—some as ancient, yet still as relevant, as Socratic dialogue.

Many foregoing points are directed at assumptions, assertions, or conventional wisdom that have questionable validity. I challenge them. But I do not dismiss them. Hooker raises important questions worthy of additional research and comparison across the war colleges. Overall, Hooker deploys the points in the service of worthy recommendations to

strengthen the quality of war college faculty, students, and curriculum—objectives for which I count myself an ally.

Assessing the Situation: What Needs to Change?

As with any profession, expertise and practice must evolve as society's needs change. Tools, techniques, and context for applying violence to impose one's will upon others are not static. Hence, war colleges cannot be static and thus risk stagnation. Furthermore, war colleges do not stand alone. Within the defense establishment, war colleges are vital segments of a vast training, education, and development community that combines features tailored for parochial service responsibilities nested within a common, overarching, joint professional framework. Within US society, imperatives of healthy civil-military relations require American military professional education to nest within the broader national community, as one among many professions American society needs to survive and thrive.

War colleges seek to prevent war but must prepare their graduates to use violence or coercion successfully for security, liberty, prosperity, justice, happiness, and blessings better associated with peace. War as an instrument of protecting or realizing these higher aspirations draws on specialized knowledge and expertise requiring deep study. Indeed, the core professional expertise in the instrumental use of violence makes its mastery through education much more desirable than its development through practice.

Hooker offers valuable recommendations. Having reviewed recent literature on PME in general and senior-level (war college) PME in particular, my sense is we are ripe for a comprehensive review to assess existing programs and to consider new approaches aimed at making war colleges better.

What would a comprehensive review look like? Frankly, some of it already happens routinely. The Military Education Coordination Council (MECC), overseen by the Joint Staff, is a collaborative body empowered and motivated by the Goldwater-Nichols reforms to improve jointness across professional military education. Across the war colleges, PME leaders compare notes with other American PME institutions and with allied and partner counterparts around the world.

Responding to the *2018 National Defense Strategy* and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, the MECC is working to revamp the Officer Professional Military Education Program to focus on learning outcomes, continuing a trend that has been building in PME and the American higher education community more generally. Complementary pairing of military and civilian accreditation processes induces a healthy dialogue between communities of national security professionals and representatives of other fields of expert knowledge associated with higher education. Additionally, MECC members are working to frame a new vision of PME and talent

management that directly answers the challenge outlined in the *2018 National Defense Strategy*.

Additionally, drawing the threads together from the foregoing sections, improvements should focus on how war colleges contribute to talent management and should include several important endeavors.

War colleges should increase their emphasis on faculty quality, particularly military faculty, as a means to improve student learning outcomes. Additionally, we should do more to highlight faculty experience—the tremendous value of our “second graduating class”—who have much to give back to the profession in future strategic and operational assignments.

We should, for example, take advantage of the authority to extend select faculty military officers beyond mandatory retirement dates to draw additional benefit from their professional seasoning. In addition to rotating more faculty back to strategic and operational assignments, we should identify serving national security professionals—military and civilian—who should be given extended time to conduct teaching, scholarship, and service using the war colleges as their home base.

War colleges should develop more fidelity about the experience, talents, limitations, and interests of incoming students as a means for assessing what might best assist them to meet the profession’s evolving needs.

War colleges should more clearly understand student talent to better tailor war college curricula to their anticipated future responsibilities and assignments. We should start by giving greater recognition to our students’ senior-level experience and expertise.

Program improvements should better leverage state-of-the-art insights on educational methodologies, tools to assess strengths and weaknesses of incoming students, and ways to incorporate student preferences. We should consider increasing ways to focus on individualized needs through mechanisms such as specialized elective programs and areas of concentrations that better match students’ anticipated future assignment paths and interests. Given improvements to collaborative tools, it may even make sense to share more experiences across the war colleges using online, resident, or blended methods, as is already the case with the JCLASS-EX.

Finally, keeping faith with the war colleges’ roots as extensions of military staffs, we should retain and even strengthen the manner in which faculty and student compositions—such as research papers, projects, war games, briefings, and outreach—contribute to exploration of and possible solutions to real-world problems. We should continue to provide relevant support through integrated research projects, connections to wargaming efforts (such as Unified Quest), and through our war college students’ and faculty members’ routine engagements with national security leaders across the entire joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational spectrum.

Conclusion

Professional military education has always focused on professional practice rather than basic research, the acquisition of knowledge, or the self-actualization of students. It is effective only if it contributes to achieving American national security aims. National security issues are exceptionally complex. War colleges are among the profession's key mechanisms for analyzing issues and working to develop effective solutions. Fundamentally, I concur with Hooker in his aspiration to make war colleges greater. But I disagree with him about how much the war colleges should look like civilian academic institutions. Although there are useful lessons and common approaches PME and civilian academia can share, none of the civilian programs I am aware of are adequate substitutes for any of the war colleges. I also do not envision a civilian program that should be.

The United States possesses a marvelous constellation of civilian and military educational institutions that stand among the best in the world. Stepping back to view officer professional development in its fullness, the complementary nature of contributions from both civilian and military education is an obvious benefit to society. The war colleges, along with the service academies, command and staff colleges, and several other professionally focused educational programs, should remain instruments with which the US military develops its professionals to meet American national security requirements.

The armed forces should not outsource this interdisciplinary obligation. America's armed forces are able to tap the world's best civilian higher education system to supplement professional education requirements. But the armed services have the fundamental responsibility to educate and to develop their own professionals—military officers—most prominently. Strong and healthy war colleges, driven by professional imperatives and supplemented by academic virtues, are crucial to America's national security.