

Pilots from 80th Flying Training Wing's Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot training program prepare to take off at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, October 2014 (U.S. Air Force/Danny Webb)



The Future of Senior Service College Education

Heed the Clarion Call

By Charles D. Allen and Edward J. Filiberti

In 2014, *Joint Force Quarterly* (JFQ) helped stimulate professional dialogue on joint professional military education (JPME) by establishing a new section titled “JPME Today.”

This article continues the discourse on JPME policy issues. Although initially directed by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, jointness has grown

to become an integral part of our military culture. Applying the U.S. Army leader development framework, the three pillars of joint training, joint work experiences, and JPME all served to reinforce competencies and helped acculturate jointness within a heretofore Service-centric military.

The current strategic environment has aided this transition. Unified operations during the war on terror have been

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inherently joint with officers gaining invaluable *experience* with assignments in joint, interagency, and headquarters and organizations. Focused joint *training* programs also helped prepare leaders and developed their competency in tactical and functional tasks. Notwithstanding, as historian Richard Kohn notes, “The practice of the profession is almost wholly new to an officer at each successive level of responsibility.”¹ So while joint tactical wartime experiences can serve as a springboard for continued development, at the most senior levels—operational and strategic—attaining these new competencies for our maturing warfighters will continue to depend on *education*.

Importantly, senior level colleges (SLC) provide the key educational venue for this development of critical competencies required at higher levels. While senior fellowships are an important part of broadening the perspectives of senior officers, for most officers, the required foundational knowledge is gained through attendance at resident and distance education programs of the senior Service colleges. As the U.S. military restructures to meet Title 10 manning, training, and equipping demands as well as to provide warfighting capabilities to the joint force, tensions reemerge about where to invest resources, especially during times of fiscal austerity. The purpose of this article is to examine the changed context for leader development and propose several initiatives to posture the U.S. military for future expansion and success in the post-drawdown strategic environment. The most important proposal is to maintain current student throughput—and the associated faculty resources—at the senior level. This article primarily focuses on Army senior officer education, but the arguments could be generalized to the joint force.

The Challenge to PME

While providing an important experience base for joint officer development, the war on terror and associated operational demands emphasized in-theater warfighting service and indirectly diminished the perceived value of school attendance. The emphasis

on overseas deployments resulted in routine deferrals from required professional military education (PME).² This led to a backlog of SLC deferrals where a good portion of those affected students would still greatly benefit from SLC education. The withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and corresponding drawdown of forces, however, may lead to some misguided policy decisions that fail to capitalize on current SLC throughput to address the backlog as well as expand the base of educated senior officers to meet future military expansion requirements.

Historically, as the military draws down, there has been an institutional compulsion to proportionally reduce attendance at senior PME programs. With the current competition for fiscal resources, the tendency is to equivalently reduce or “salami slice” all institutions and activities. For example, a 20 percent cut in end-strength could be applied across the board to institutional and functional organizations. That would translate to a 20 percent cut in staffing of PME schools and, consequentially by design, a 20 percent reduction in the number of officers educated within those programs. An unstated objective may be to return to pre-war on terror levels for student populations.

In fact, the current drawdown has already driven proportional reductions in manning and resourcing at PME institutions. The Army reduced faculty positions for intermediate level education at the Command and General Staff College and Army War College. Commensurate with the 29 percent budget cuts over recent years at National Defense University (NDU) (which includes the National War College and the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy) is the reduction of student selections and throughput.³ For academic year 2015, National War College student enrollment dropped from 224 to 208—just over 9 percent.

In response to both critics and champions of PME, NDU unveiled “Break Out” as its campaign strategy for the education of senior leaders at the same time as the Army War College leaders

published their academic campaign plan in *JFQ*.⁴ Both sought to reinforce the relevancy of their institutions to national defense. Reforms at the Army War College also focused on faculty credentialing along with the development and delivery of a curriculum that addressed concerns about the rigor of senior PME. Although these are important measures to improve the educational programs of the SLC, none of these efforts addresses the important opportunity of increasing the proportion of SLC graduates within the post-drawdown senior officer population by maintaining current throughput.

A key question to address for this drawdown remains: Is a reduction in the number of educated senior officers and civilians that is proportionate with force cutbacks prudent for the joint force? This is an important question to address given the frequently stated imperative to invest in leader development and education during periods of military drawdown. Historical examples often cite the interwar period between World War I and II, the resumption of senior military officer education with the start of the Korean War, and the re-professionalization of the force following the Vietnam War.

Realities of the Strategic Environment

The contemporary operational and strategic environments are no less unstable or uncertain than those historical examples and are likely to pose similar or arguably even greater leader education challenges for the joint force. As the Service with the largest manpower authorizations (nearly 1.5 million strong when counting Active, Reserve, and civilian components), developing adequate numbers of Army senior leaders while drawing down may be the sine qua non for responding to future expansion requirements. With fewer senior officers on hand, those we retain must be the best that we can make them.

While the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) directed a rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, the strategic environment continues to reveal challenges elsewhere. As Yogi Berra once stated,

“The future ain’t what it used to be.” A corollary might be that with the increasingly volatile environment, “It never will be.” Just in the past year, emerging crises in Ukraine with Russia and the Middle East and the Levant as well as the Ebola emergency response in West Africa demonstrated that the Army is expected and required to respond with its existing forces across a wide range of mission sets. Such operations call for adaptive, strategic leaders who have talented and expert senior officers in command and on their staffs. Importantly, the DSG recognizes “our inability to predict the future” and directs that the Department of Defense (DOD) “will manage the force in ways that protect its ability to regenerate capabilities that might be needed to meet future, unforeseen demands, *maintaining intellectual capital and rank structure that could be called upon to expand key elements of the force*” (emphasis added).⁵

Provide Capability and Capacity

Despite the pressures to reduce defense spending, the U.S. military will still be called on to employ its available *capabilities* based upon the operational and strategic demands of an increasingly unstable global environment. Given persistent conflict and reduced force structure because of political and fiscal realities, the joint force will require the repetitive assignment and rotation of its field-grade and most senior military officers into key strategic level headquarters and organizations. Thus, the joint force will need talented and educated leaders and managers from the Services to provide the *capacity* to fulfill rotational assignments that persistent conflict demands. Mission success will be dependent on expert knowledge, judgment, and strategic leadership competencies of experienced and appropriately educated leaders. Accordingly, mid- and senior-grade officers will assume a host of new key and essential positions as additional joint headquarters and staffs are established or augmented to deal with a wide range of *emerging* operational demands.

Accordingly, the years of persistent conflict have also institutionalized a

range of policies that assure nearly every available officer will be rotated into key and essential positions. For instance, Congress established laws and DOD promulgated policies placing limits on deployment-to-dwell ratios for both units and *individuals*.⁶ These measures require the tracking and reporting of deployments and set thresholds that require the Service secretaries’ or the Secretary of the Defense’s approval to exceed. This will limit the repeated use of selectively educated senior officers.

The Army’s present challenge is to meet drawdown requirements for an end-strength of 450,000 Soldiers by fiscal year 2018. With the all-too-real prospects of a second sequestration, this drawdown may be continued to reach 420,000 under the provisions of the Budget Control Act of 2011.⁷ The nightmare scenario for the Army includes the prospect of reducing Active Component (AC) end-strength to 380,000 or lower depending upon competing budget pressures driven by the U.S. economic and political climates.

Senior Education Requirements

In an Army based on detailed force planning and documented requirements, it seems implausible that the Service does not have explicit requirements for senior officer education or a plan to distribute the valuable JMPE graduates and their intellectual capital to key and essential positions within the force. It does have a policy for officer development that addresses senior Service college education for command and staff positions requiring “a thorough knowledge of strategy and the art and science of developing and using instruments of national power . . . during peace and war. This knowledge is necessary in order to perform Army, Joint, or Defense Agency operations at the strategic level.”⁸ Within DOD, this is Military Education Level 1 (MEL 1) for selected successful lieutenant colonels and colonels at the respective grades of O5 and O6. Civilians in the GS-14 and GS-15 grades are also offered MEL 1 opportunities.

One method of identifying SLC attendance requirements is to identify

specific positions on manning authorization documents that require MEL 1 to support successful individual leader and organizational performance. Given a specific number of positions, the Army personnel management system could then select the requisite number of officers (by grade and specialty) to attend SLC venues and then distribute those officers to the force to fill those billets. This method would seem to be the preferred way for the Army to do business, identifying requirements and then filling them. It has been discussed often but never implemented due to the constraints it would place on the personnel management system.

While designating certain billets as MEL 1 may be reassuring to the Army bureaucracy, it ignores or at least downplays the broader purpose: The development of the requisite Army leaders and institutionalizing the flexibility demanded by emerging requirements and the likely expansion of the force. We cannot afford a management approach that breaks down when faced with real-world requirements and inevitable crises. The Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) sets the goal of providing “the right officer with the right education at the right time.”⁹ We believe the goal should be more explicit for senior leaders—to *develop the greatest number of high potential officers in order to provide the Army with the pool of talented, educated officers to act as strategic leaders and senior advisors through MEL 1/SLC experience*. These officers have a greater likelihood of being promoted and selected for service at the O6 grade and beyond. Realistically, they will likely have multiple assignments during the remainder of their careers, with one or more postings requiring SLC education.

There are impediments, however. In large measure, the Army is dealing with an artifact of the war on terror, which placed a premium on service in key positions within the deployed operational force over JPME attendance. This led to a culture of deferral for PME where being selected was more important than attending SLC. Members of the profession of arms in the AC and Active Competitive



Members of 366th Fighter Wing train alongside Army and Marine Corps affiliates during capstone training event, November 2014 (U.S. Air Force/Roy Lynch)

Categories (ACC) watched and learned that it was possible to succeed without PME attendance. Concomitantly, the Army culture shifted over the past decade of war to one that generally dismissed education in the face of demands for training and operational experience. The opportunity now exists to reset such “beliefs and expected behaviors” with the AC and ACC officers.

The key to attaining the ALDS goal is to embed PME attendance into the culture of the Army where being MEL 1 credentialed is what successful professionals strive to achieve and how they obtain those key billets. This is now the case within the Reserve Component (as evidenced by sustained demand for Distance Education Program attendance) and within some Special Branches (with requests for increased number of MEL 1 slots).

The greatest redress to this war on terror cultural artifact has been Army Chief of Staff guidance that requires MEL 1 completion prior to assuming command or assignment to key billets as

well as additional scrutiny of deferments by elevating the approval authority. In November 2014, Air Force Chief of Staff General Mark Welsh also directed a rebalancing of PME within his Service: “to be promoted to colonel, lieutenant colonels must have finished senior developmental education at Air War College, or an equivalent [MEL 1] program.”¹⁰

While the number of operational deferments has been greatly reduced, the Army still needs a few years to recover from the shift in priorities that reduced educational attendance for more than a decade during the Operation *Enduring Freedom* and Operation *Iraqi Freedom* conflicts—hence the need for a second “clarion call.”¹¹

The Army Case

For the 2014 academic year, 946 seats were available for Army officers in the Active and Reserve components. Of these, 527 seats were in the Resident Education Program and the Army War College Fellowship Program; 419 seats were in the Distance Education

Program. ACC officers occupied 390 of the 527 seats in the resident and 61 seats in the fellowship programs, as well as 60 of the 419 seats in the distance program. Under current Army processes, the number of officers selected for senior-level education depends largely on the capacity at the various colleges and in the fellowship program—not on validated educational requirements for specific billets in the operating and generating forces.

Previous studies by the Department of the Army examined O5 and O6 positions and determined that approximately 75 percent of O6 positions required MEL 1. A 2012 Army-funded RAND study was unsuccessful in explicitly identifying MEL 1 requirements across Army organizations.¹² Although the Army seeks and values MEL 1 graduates, RAND found no consistent rationale to validate MEL 1 assignment requirements. The RAND study confirmed the conclusion of prior studies that attendance is dictated principally from the capacity of MEL 1 institutions. Even



Students from National Defense University listen to brief in combat direction center aboard USS *Shiloh* in Yokosuka, Japan, October 2014 (U.S. Navy/Liam Kennedy)

during the “Grow the Army” initiative to support the surge of units for *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, the number of seats for uniformed officers remained steady. Paradoxically, during those years the Army War College was permitted to expand its capacity by adding four seminars to accommodate an increase in International Fellows (IFs) (from 40 to 80) attending the Resident Education Program. The other attendance numbers stayed fairly constant with some wide swings in Reserve Component attendance based upon approved AC deferrals.

For fiscal years 2012–2015, approximately 74 percent of Active and Reserve component O6 officers have completed or will complete MEL 1. Of particular interest, 77 percent of currently serving ACC O6s are MEL 1 qualified or are attending a MEL 1–producing venue. These percentages approximate the proportion of billets (75 percent) previously found to require MEL 1 education. What the 74 percent of the total O6 population qualified as MEL 1 compared to the approximate 75 percent of positions requiring that level of education does not account for is that MEL 1 graduates will generally serve in two to three different senior leader positions before retiring. This makes management of MEL 1 officers problematic, especially given that

those MEL 1 positions are currently not coded, and it also leaves the “bench” empty for when the MEL 1 positions are invariably expanded during periods of war.

The projected reduction of Army force structure decreases the AC from 569,000 to 490,000 for fiscal year 2016 with much smaller reductions in the Reserve (1,000) and National Guard (8,000). The Department of the Army G1 projects that the operating strength of ACC O6s will be reduced by 11.2 percent and ACC O5s by 14.2 percent—a combined reduction of 12.5 percent by 2018. A salami-slice reduction in Army War College capacity proportional to the end-strength reduction would reduce ACC students by 12.5 percent (167 to 146 officers). To meet JPME seminar composition requirements, there would be a corresponding reduction in the number of IF, civilian, and other Service attendees for the Resident Education Program.

A Strategic Choice

A stated goal of the Army Chief of Staff is to increase the quality of the officer corps to meet the demands of an increasingly complex strategic and operational environment and to enable the rapid expansion of the Army. The scope

of this increased demand can be extensive. For instance, during the start of the war on terror, the number of Army O5 and O6 positions to support DOD, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, joint, and special operations force activities grew by over 500. This demand equates to around 5.5 percent of the projected total O6/O5 AC population in fiscal year 2018 and almost 4 percent across all (Active and Reserve) component O6/O5 populations.

Maintaining the current throughput of Army officers across all SLC venues would increase the percentage of O6 MEL 1–qualified officers from approximately 74 to around 78. Importantly, the proportion of MEL 1 ACC O6s would increase from about 77 percent to 89 percent, significantly adding to the quality of the bench of the smaller pool of officers. We have also seen the number of deferments decline due to the reduction in operations tempo and policy decisions by Army senior leaders. Consequently, SLC attendance should occur earlier in an officer’s career—immediately following successful O5-level command or equivalent. Combined with sustained throughput, this would increase the proportion of Army O6 MEL 1 ACC graduates in the force to 90 percent or more. Importantly, this would increase the proportion of Army MEL 1 graduates across the Active and Reserve components to more than 80 percent of serving O6s.

Implications

In 2004, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld notoriously remarked that “you go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want or wish to have.”¹³ While he was severely criticized for what was interpreted as a flip-pant response to a Soldier’s issue with Humvee armor protection, it brings to light a force management truism. The military must respond to crises with what we have and, at the senior level, with those whom we have. For most projected contingencies, there will likely be limited time to train, educate, and gain the senior leader experience necessary to fill key positions compe-

tently. Senior leaders are not grown or educated overnight. And at the strategic level, pedestrian performances can have profound negative consequences. To expand positions at these high levels, we must rely on the bench, and the bench must be as talented as possible. There is a range of relatively low-cost initiatives that can help build the bench.

Reestablishing an appropriate balance of education with operational experience and training, especially for senior officers, requires demonstration of its value to the profession of arms. First, selection and attendance at SLC must be the norm for high-potential lieutenant colonels. Second, the officer leader development policy has to establish time in officer career paths to include SLC attendance. Third, completion of SLC programs must be viewed as institutional/professional certification for command and key billet assignments. Finally, while education may enable the individual's contribution to organizational missions, duty performance is the benchmark for future advancement of senior military officers. Experience and education constitute two sides of the same coin and should be used to posture senior officers and their organizations for future success.

Maintaining current Army throughput would require support from other activities to sustain the quotas for IF, civilian, and other Service attendees at the various SLC venues and continue to build joint, interagency, and international relationships as well as partner capacity. Additionally, maintaining throughput might increase the number of senior officers not available to the force. However, for fiscal years 2014 through 2017, the current grade plate adjustments and Army G1 operating strength projections accommodate the increased number of transient, holdee, and student positions.

Maintaining the throughput for the Army War College Resident Education Program would require fully resourcing the requisite faculty positions (Title 10, military, or contract faculty) throughout the planned drawdown. A good news story is that 60 percent of the Army War College Title 10 positions lost during the sequestration budget cuts have been

recently reinstated. This represents an important institutional commitment to resourcing senior leader education. However, in the current era of competition for diminishing resources—in this case enabled by funding—future calls for “fair-share cuts” could inevitably result in another round of salami-slice reductions across the force. We should be reminded that essential elements of strategic leadership are enabling the future success of an organization and setting priorities to do so. Continuing to prioritize SLC at the current throughput of around 950 senior Army officers accomplishes both of those strategic imperatives. This will achieve an overall goal of 80 percent MEL I-qualified colonels from all components and a specified goal of 90 percent for ACC colonels.

Since JPME policies dictate an interconnectivity across all SLC venues to meet minimum Service and interagency mix requirements, we believe a second clarion call must be sounded for all Services to avoid misguided adherence to proportional cuts in SLC throughput capacity. The Nation and its Servicemembers deserve the best joint-capable senior leaders that the Services can produce. Perhaps most importantly, this will give the Army the ability to respond to any future crisis with talented, experienced, educated senior leaders at a moment's notice, ready to provide the right officer with the right education at the right time to meet a wide range of potential operational demands. JFQ

Notes

¹ Richard H. Kohn, “First Priorities in Military Professionalism,” *Orbis* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 2013), 387.

² Charles D. Allen, “Redress of Professional Military Education: A Clarion Call,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 59 (4th Quarter 2010), 94–100.

³ Merrill D’Arezzo, “War Colleges Take Steep Budget Hits,” *Air Force Times*, October 27, 2014, 19.

⁴ 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; and Anthony Cucolo and Lance Betros, “Strength-

ening PME at the Senior Level: The Case of the U.S. Army War College,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 74 (3rd Quarter 2014), 50–57.

⁵ *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2012).

⁶ 10 U.S. Code § 991, “Management of Deployments of Members and Measurement and Data Collection of Unit Operating and Personnel Tempo,” 2011; and Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Memorandum, “Deployment-to-Dwell, Mobilization-to-Dwell Policy Revision,” November 1, 2013.

⁷ *Budget Control Act of 2011*, Pub.L. 112–25, S. 365, 112th Cong. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 2, 2011).

⁸ Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, November 1, 1998), 29.

⁹ *A Leader Development Strategy for a 21st Century Army* (Fort Monroe, VA: Training and Doctrine Command, November 25, 2009).

¹⁰ Stephen Losey, “New Education Rules for Air Force Officers Begin Dec. 1,” *Air Force Times*, November 7, 2014, available at <www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/benefits/education/2014/11/07/new-education-rules-for-air-force-officers-begin-dec-1/18637489/>.

¹¹ Allen.

¹² Ralph Masi, *Army Senior Service College Requirements Study* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012).

¹³ Eric Schmitt, “Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld over Lack of Armor,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2004; Ray Suarez, “Troops Question Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld about Armor,” *PBS News Hour*, December 9, 2004, available at <www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military-july-dec04-armor_12-9/>.