

Testimony to House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation
“20 Years Later: Professional Military Education”

War Colleges: Observations and Suggestions
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Introduction

From 1990 through 2004, I was associated with all six of the US military senior service schools – the war colleges – as teaching faculty, department chairperson, curriculum reviewer, and visiting professor. At each, I taught the core course on strategy and policy as well as electives on World War II, Vietnam, the 1st Gulf War, coalition leadership, and technology. In 2005, I was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars during which I conducted an analysis of the six institutions entitled “America’s War College: Are They Teaching the Right Stuff?” while serving on the CSIS panel “Beyond Goldwater-Nichols” that examined PME. Since then I have continued to teach, lecture, and consult with the war colleges.

I remain convinced that the war colleges are valuable institutions that facilitate the professional development of senior officials preparing for their final years of careers - be they military or civilian on paths that will include leadership or advice. Individually, they perform an admirable job – one that has been greatly enhanced over the past 20 years by the efforts of Representative Ike Skelton and his staff. Collectively, they can learn much from each other – and my observations and suggestions offered below are made in that spirit.

My comments are divided into four specific categories, purposefully rank ordered – faculty, students, governance, and curriculum. Each is previewed by thoughts of a general nature, several observations derived from my experience and recommendations for future consideration. As a preview, suggestions involve adjusted professional standards for faculty; intense screening of incoming students; continuity of senior war college leadership; and hard decisions on what and what NOT to teach.

Faculty

The quality of war college teaching faculty is at the center of war colleges, and has been significantly enhanced by the recruitment and retention of civilian academics as urged by Ike Skeleton over 20 years ago. I myself was a benefactor of Title X appointment, service, and tenure. Indeed there has been a significant growth in the ratio of academically qualified civilian academic to professional military officers. The bottom line is that faculty make (or break) a war college.

Two observations derived from my personal experience as a teacher, department chair, and several visiting professorships are relevant. First, the growth of civilian professors midst uniformed officers with lesser credentials has fostered an unexpected

“us” versus “them” environment simply because two professions have different standards. This has been heightened by the emergence of yet another category, retired military officers who lack PhD. The second aspect results from the chosen war college teaching philosophy of seminar learning. This demands not only exceptional teaching skills but also comfort at “cross disciplinary” education. War college faculty must be teachers first. As one who has done it, teaching at the war college is hard involving time consuming preparation.

To address these observations, I would suggest that the war colleges collectively rethink the categories of faculty as military and civilian to one of “field practitioner” and academic specialist. Each would have its own sets of standards for recruiting as well as professional development; indeed practitioners would rotate on and off the faculty while academics remain. Secondly, the war colleges need to address the tough demands upon heavy seminar teaching at the graduate level with sequential courses taught simultaneously by all members of the departments. It simply is not effective as no academic college does this. Either the teaching load must be reduced or time to execute the curriculum must be extended.

Students

The second most critical element for war colleges is the quality and receptiveness of students. As in the past, each war college has a concentration of officers from its own service component with the exception of the two NDU schools and the Marine Corps War College (most of these go to the other five schools). My experience documented an increasing emphasis over the past 20 years in quantity at the expense of quality; this was complimented by significant increase in civilian students.

Several observations from my study are relevant. Military students for war colleges are selected by their own personnel managers based upon “seats available” and past professional performance with little apparent connection to next assignment. Interestingly though the size of the military has declined in the past decade, the total number of officers selected for war colleges has remained constant; indeed class size seems to be limited by physical capability of the institution (number of seats in seminar rooms). Secondly, discussion as a teacher with my students over a decade documented about 20% to 25% of them did not want to be at the war college either because they lacked the interest or were not academically capable of graduate level seminar instruction. This was complimented by my anecdotal evidence that approximately one third of the students planned to and would leave active duty within the next 3 years or follow on assignment.

My study offered two suggestions. First prospective student should be required to do what all who desire attendance at graduate schools do - apply for admissions with appropriate credentials, voicing a desire to attend. And they should rank order what war college they wish to attend – thus involving the war colleges in competition for the best and most qualified students. This would be complimented by my curriculum recommendation for each war college to be an individual “center of excellence.” Students would incur a service obligation upon graduation of at least five years or two

assignments. This would involve service personnel managers to insure proper utilization. Explicit here should assumption that non-attendance does not preclude promotion for 0-6 ranks; indeed event to flag rank (as has been the historic USN practice).

Governance

The third element addressed how each war college organizes itself to execute its mission and then the selection of its leaders. In general, each institution, based upon its evolution, tradition, and service expectations is organized differently with respect to specific academic departments and bureaucratic overhead. This parallels the fact that each has its own unique mission statement. And each has a senior leader, be they president, commandant, or commander, as well as a senior academic leader, a dean.

My experience highlighted two specific observations here. First with respect to the senior leader, his or her tenure has been uniformly short, averaging 2½ years during my war college teaching time. There were several instance where the president was there only one year, in another instance he was there four. Realizing that it takes one academic year to come to grips with academic issues and another year to implement adjustments, anything less than three years is not enough time for presidents to make a difference. Secondly, differences in separate department structures hindered attempts at “cross talk” between the institution, at the senior level, deans and departments, and finally teaching faculty. There has been an attempt for inter-war college exchange under the auspices of Military Education Coordination Council (MECC); yet its title speaks rhetorically to its advisory role. At the working level, war colleges simply ignore each other.

Here I would suggest two changes. First to insure continuity of high level leadership, war college presidents should remain in position for a minimum of five years, perhaps even ten to insure continuity of ideas – following the model of service academies with a “tomb stone” promotion to next higher rank upon retirement. While proficiency in service or functional responsibility is essential, equally essential is background in educational matters. Secondly, at OSD level, a chancellor for senior service schools needs to be created, similar to same position at large state universities, with real power/leverage/impact on both faculty and curricula issues. The main responsibility of this office would the institution and mentoring of inter war college issues.

Curriculum

The final element is curriculum, thought by many to be the key element. Here Ike Skelton has preached “vigor.” As I have learned, given a quality faculty, a receptive student body, and enlightened leadership, vigor in the curriculum will take care of itself. Each war college follows a series of common core courses - strategy through historical case studies - national defense policy through political science theory; peculiar service concerns through doctrine. Likewise, each has its own set of “wild cards” – overseas trips, research versus classroom “trade offs”, and electives. Yet each war college has its unique mission statement; thus each tailors its own curriculum linked to its own concerns. There is no common vision.

In my view, war college curricula lack concentration at the substance level. Given the encyclopedic nature that each tries to cover, the tight academic time frame (9 months with very little “wobble room” about starting dates – except the Naval War College tradition), and constant demands to “stay current”, the substance of the curriculum at all is “a mile wide and an inch deep” ; at its worst just “dumbs down” to check the blocks. Curriculum becomes a matter of process as opposed to substance, contact time as opposed to substantive content.

Here I offer two suggestions. First, in curriculum matters, war colleges need to realize that “one size does not fit all”; instead each needs to establish an individual “centers of excellence” such as the Army War college priority to operational/strategic command; National War College concentration on national security policy; ICAF focus upon resource management and procurement policy; Air War College attention to technology and strategy; Naval War College concentration in theory. Students then could “major” through the selection of a particular school. Likewise, faculty could be recruited and retained there within their area of expertise. Secondly, war college curriculum for each war college need to be doubled from 9 months to 18, commencing at least twice a year (the Naval War College has been doing so for over 20 years) to facilitate hard decisions on what and what not to teach. This should also address the issue of timely seat filling” in the current period of intense operational tempo – the fact that it is difficult to find time for education during wartime.

Summary:

In retrospect, all war colleges are justifiably proud of their programs, some of which have been in existence of almost a century. This negates recommendations that they can be duplicated by contracts to civilian universities or replaced by a fellowship year away from the military. My experience suggests that this pride has created intense protectiveness with respect their own prerogatives on both the process and substance of their operation. As a visiting professor, all I had to do to be ignored was to suggest that another war college did something better; indeed the JPME requirement has only enhanced this attitude. This has been more evident over the past 20 years as they have implemented the Skelton reforms. As experience with both Goldwater-Nichols and the Skelton reforms suggest, if the war colleges cannot do this for themselves, then Congress should do as they did 20 years ago, set the standards for them.