



Joint and Combined Warfighting School students participate in joint exercise at Joint Forces Staff College

JFSC (Susan Milton)

MANAGE OR EDUCATE

Fulfilling the Purpose of Joint Professional Military Education

By VINCENT C. BOWHERS

This disconnect between JPME [joint professional military education] and joint duty assignments has become a common practice, disregarding a fundamental purpose of JPME, which by law and policy, is preparation for those assignments.

—U.S. Congress, *Another Crossroads*?¹

Any educational program that loses sight of its purpose will likely fail to achieve that purpose. This might seem obvious and easy to avoid, but it is exactly how we are falling short in fulfilling the purpose of joint professional military education (JPME). The purpose of JPME is currently seen differently from the officer management perspective than it is from the joint education perspective, and this difference is degrading officer performance on joint staffs and resulting in less than optimal joint operational planning and execution. Without a single clear purpose, JPME requirements are difficult to focus, and the vision of having well-prepared officers performing joint staff and command duties is not being completely fulfilled. The good news is that recovering JPME from this shortfall will not be difficult. We simply need to reestablish a clear purpose, update the requirements to that purpose, and reshape JPME programs based on the results.

Development of the JPME System

Although there were efforts to educate officers from the different Services together

before World War II, the original purpose of JPME is frequently traced back to a need identified by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and General Henry H. Arnold for more inter-Service trust and understanding in the officer corps during World War II. The issue was not that the Allied forces did not succeed in their efforts, but that they could have done a better job if they had more officers who understood the challenges and opportunities of using land, sea, and air forces together in joint operations. Educational programs at the Army-Navy Staff College, National War College, and Armed Forces Staff College were established to bring together officers from all the Services to learn joint perspectives in preparation for joint command and staff duties. The purpose clearly was to prepare officers for service at the joint command and staff levels and thus improve planning and execution of coordinated land, sea, and air operations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, joint operational problems, such as the 1980 failed attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran, led to the establishment of joint officer management (JOM) policies as part of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Goldwater-Nichols gave specific guidance for preparing joint specialty officers, including the requirement to complete a JPME school followed by a joint duty assignment in order to become joint qualified.² The purpose was to provide select officers with *education and experience in joint matters*, defined as “matters relating to the integrated employment of land, sea, and air forces, including . . . (1) national military strategy; (2) strategic planning and contingency planning; and (3) command and control of combat operations under unified command.”³ Goldwater-Nichols linked joint qualification to promotion rates and required joint duty for promotion to flag or general rank. Congress essentially mandated an improvement in joint education and experience, using promotion as the leverage.

In 1987, Representative Les Aspin, Chairman of the House Committee on Armed Services (HASC), appointed the Panel on Military Education to be led by Representative Ike Skelton. The Skelton Panel was charged with reviewing “Department of Defense plans for implementing the joint professional military education requirements of the Goldwater-Nichols Act with a view toward assuring that this education provides the proper linkage between the Service com-

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petent officer and the competent joint officer.” The panel was also instructed to “assess the ability of the Department of Defense military education system to develop professional military strategists, joint warfighters and tacticians” and to report recommendations as appropriate.⁴ Again, this HASC chairman’s tasking focused the purpose of JPME on joint command and staff competence.

The Skelton Panel made nine key recommendations for significant JPME improvements. In summary, they were:

- establish a professional military education (PME) framework with primary education objectives for flag/general, senior, intermediate, and primary PME levels
- improve the quality of faculty through hiring civilian faculty and assigning high-quality military faculty
- establish a two-phase joint specialty officer education process with Phase I taught at the Service colleges and Phase II taught at the Armed Forces Staff College (now the Joint Forces Staff College)
- convert the National War College into a National Center for Strategic Studies, which provides both research and education programs
- make national military strategy the primary focus and increase the Service mix at the senior Service colleges
- implement a substantive Capstone course that includes national security strategy and national military strategy
- determine if Navy military education should include attendance at both intermediate and senior colleges
- establish a Director of Military Education on the Joint Staff
- require an essay-type examination and writing of a paper at intermediate and senior PME schools.⁵

These recommendations were used to design the JPME system we have today.

JPME program guidance is provided by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP). The policy calls for five military education levels:

- precommissioning
- primary (O-1 to O-3)
- intermediate (O-4)
- senior (O-5 to O-6)
- general/flag officer.



The first two levels have a Service and tactical focus with limited joint exposure. The intermediate level of PME has two phases focused on operational art for the purpose of expanding the understanding of “joint force deployment and employment at the operational and tactical levels of war” as well as “joint and service perspectives.”⁶ Intermediate-level JPME Phase I (JPME I) is taught via resident and nonresident programs at the Service colleges. Intermediate-level JPME Phase II (JPME II) is taught via a resident program at the Joint and Combined Warfighting School (JCWS) at Joint Forces Staff College (JFSC). There is a similar program available via a blended online and resident delivery for Reserve Component and National Guard officers at the Joint Continuing Distance Education School at JFSC. Senior-level JPME programs are focused on “strategic leadership and advisement,” including “national security strategy, theater strategy and campaigning, joint planning processes and systems, and joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational capabilities and integration.”⁷ Senior-level JPME I is available via nonresident programs offered by the Service colleges, and senior-level JPME II is taught in resident programs at the Service colleges, JCWS, Joint Advanced Warfighting School at JFSC, and the National War College and Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy (formerly the Industrial College of the Armed Forces) at National Defense University (NDU). The general/flag officer level program is focused on preparing senior officers for “high-level joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational responsibilities”⁸ and is taught in the Capstone program at NDU.

The Management-Education Disconnect

So what is the purpose of JPME today? The OPMEP states that it is “designed to fulfill the educational requirements for joint officer management as mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act.”⁹ Goldwater-Nichols and the Skelton Panel report indicate JPME should prepare officers for joint staff and command duty. But when we examine the current practice of sending officers to JPME whenever it fits in their career path, with apparent disregard for providing the education before joint duty, it is clear that the Services feel the purpose is to qualify officers for promotion under JOM policy, not to prepare them for joint duty. The management perspective and the education perspective of the purpose of JPME are disconnected, and this is degrading officer preparation for joint staff and command duties and hurting our overall joint operational performance. This disconnect has resulted in two specific problems that have a negative impact on JOM and JPME: first, officers are not getting the JPME when they need it; and second, JPME programs are being managed to provide throughput in support of promotion eligibility instead of being designed to improve joint duty performance.

The first problem is evident by looking at when in their career paths officers complete JPME II. If the purpose of JPME is to prepare officers for joint staff or command duty, then they should complete the education before they are assigned to a joint position. In reality, over half of the intermediate-level officers serving in joint-designated billets receive their JPME II after at least 1 year in the joint duty assignment, and many of them get the education at the end of or after their joint

tour. JPME II students frequently comment that they wish they had the education before they started their joint tour. Staff officers frequently check into their joint assignment without completing joint education and are tasked with duties that they do not fully understand and are not prepared for.

In the absence of JPME II, new staff officers must learn through on-the-job training (OJT) and rely on assistance from the few educated and experienced staff members who understand joint planning, deployment, and employment. This method of learning joint staff processes and perspectives takes valuable time from the experienced staff and reduces the overall staff effectiveness. Staff officers report that the OJT learning process takes from 7 months to 2 years for an officer to become joint proficient, depending on prior experience and position responsibilities.¹⁰ Then, after a year or two of OJT, when staff officers have learned joint basics the “hard way” and can effectively perform their duties without assistance from more experienced staff officers, they are frequently sent to JCWS for the 10-week JPME II curriculum and become unavailable to do staff work. The one benefit of this timing is that it brings more experience to classroom discussions, but this is outweighed by the overall decline in staff performance in the experienced officer’s absence. It becomes obvious that these officers are being sent to the school so they can be fully joint qualified and promoted under Goldwater-Nichols, not because it is preparing them for joint duty.

The second problem caused by a divided understanding of the purpose of JPME is that joint education program decisions are frequently made for the wrong reasons. Without a clear purpose, it is difficult to determine how many officers need the education and what they need to learn. If the purpose of JPME is to prepare officers for joint staff and command duties, then the program throughput, length, and content should be based on the number of joint staff and command positions and the type of duties involved.

Currently, the distribution of student seats for JCWS is based proportionally on the number of joint billets each Service is assigned on the Joint Duty Assignment List (JDAL). JDAL billets are intended to be only those billets that involve significant exposure to joint matters, but research shows that they basically include any O-4 and above billet on a joint staff.¹¹ Efforts to refine the JDAL to only billets

with significant joint exposure are resisted by those who see the purpose of those billets as filling a promotion requirement under Goldwater-Nichols. As a result, there are over 12,000 JDAL billets requiring JPME support. If one assumes an average tour length of 3 years, with some shorter tours being countered by repeat joint tours, the JPME requirement to meet joint assignments is about 4,000 graduates a year. JCWS, the primary source of intermediate-level JPME II graduates, teaches four classes of about 255 students each year. When we subtract the number of international students from the total, JFSC graduates fewer than 1,000 Phase II-educated officers a year. JPME II programs at the Service colleges, National War College, and Eisenhower School graduate about 1,000 additional U.S. military officers a year. This leaves a shortfall of about 2,000 JPME II graduates per year, but it is a shortfall that is based on maximizing Goldwater-Nichols promotion qualifiers, not improving joint staff and command competence. Pressure to meet the excess demand has been driving JPME program changes that are based on the wrong purpose.

For example, one change that resulted from this pressure to increase throughput was the reduction of JCWS from a 12-week to a 10-week curriculum so it could support four classes a year instead of three and meet a quota of about 1,000 graduates. This change increased the throughput, but only the length of the course was reduced, not the educational requirements. As a result, the curriculum was compressed and both student and faculty reading and reflection time was reduced at the same time when the need for critical thinking to address complex problems in the joint operating environment was gaining emphasis.

Throughput pressure also led to expanding JPME II certified programs to include resident senior Service schools. Again, this change was made with an eye toward increasing throughput for Goldwater-Nichols promotion eligibility and not because the Service schools had JPME II-equivalent programs. In fact, the student and faculty Service mix requirement at the senior Service colleges is not as joint as the other JPME II schools, limiting the joint experience and exposure to other Service cultures in the classroom.

Throughput pressure is also driving a current proposal to move JPME II toward online education, or a blended online and resident education with a shortened resident portion. This approach needs to be evaluated based on the educational purpose of JPME and not just throughput for promotion under Goldwater-Nichols. Careful consideration is needed to determine if the learning objectives, particularly those in the affective domain dealing with attitudes and values, can be achieved with these delivery methods. It should also be noted that officers surveyed, regardless of rank or age, show a strong preference for classroom education and cite interaction with members of the other Services as the most valuable aspect of JPME.¹² Are the Services willing to invest time toward joint education or are they trying to add this requirement on to the officers’ “free” time, lowering the quality of life and learning for officers working long hours and having to study JPME at home? There is also a pilot program to expand JPME II to satellite campuses at locations with concentrations of joint billets. This could improve the chances that staff officers who did not get JPME prior to arrival at their joint duty station could at



Chairman speaks with Joint Staff Army interns and Air Force fellows

U.S. Army (Sun L. Vega)

least get the education at an early stage of their joint tour, but the time investment would need to be supported by the joint commands, and the delivery method must be able to meet educational objectives based on preparing officers for joint responsibilities, not just increasing throughput. If satellite JPME programs are developed, joint educational standards need to be maintained for satellite locations through a curriculum and faculty development hub, such as JFSC, to prevent the education from becoming too regionally focused and limited in scope. Many future JPME concepts have merit, but only if approached with a clear view that the purpose of the education is to prepare officers for joint duty and not just to get them the joint qualification “check in the block.”

There are some who say that recent joint operational experience has made the military sufficiently joint and there is no longer a need for JPME programs. This might be true for some at the tactical level, but shortfalls in joint staff and command performance at the operational level continue to be reported in studies, surveys, and leadership comments, showing that improvement is still needed.¹³ The continuing importance of JPME is reflected in JCWS graduate surveys, in which well over 90 percent consistently rate the education as valuable to their job performance. It should also be noted that as current joint operations wind down, joint experience will become more limited, and the need for joint education, to prevent a return to parochial Service cultures and a lack of trust and understanding between the Services, will increase.

Improving JPME

Fixing the problems caused by a divided view of JPME’s purpose requires a focus on the true purpose of JPME. The Joint Staff and Congress have conducted JPME studies over the past few years and have come to similar conclusions that JPME programs are sound, but need improvement. The studies confirmed that the purpose of JPME is to prepare officers for joint staff and command duties.¹⁴ With this as the focus, we can examine current and future joint duty requirements and build JPME programs that prepare officers to fill these needs.

A first step is to determine which JDAL positions truly need JPME in preparation for duty. Past resistance to culling the JDAL could be overcome by weakening the link to promotion and strengthening the link to joint duty performance. It is an unintended consequence

of the Goldwater-Nichols mandate for joint education and experience that the Services often take a check-in-the-block approach to JPME. Changing legislation to relieve the joint qualification promotion requirement would relieve Service pressure to keep JDAL billet numbers artificially high. This would have to be done carefully to prevent an exodus of officers back to Service assignments, where they see greater exposure to those who can help their careers. An alternative would be to encourage joint education and duty as career enhancing, but not mandatory for promotion. This would reduce the Service pressure to maintain JDAL billets just for promotion eligibility and joint assignments could be reduced to only those that involve in-depth joint matters. Only the best officers from the Services should qualify for the remaining joint assignments. To encourage a competitive nature in joint assignments, a requirement that officers with joint service be promoted at least at a rate proportional to the number of JDAL billets the Service holds must be ensured.

A second part of any legislative change should require completion of joint education prior to reporting for joint duty. This would prevent the Services from assigning officers to joint billets without investing in their preparation. Another concept to consider is to promote students upon graduation from JPME institutions, much like our Service academies commission new officers upon graduation. Promoting officers from O-3 to O-4 or O-4 to O-5 upon graduation from an appropriate JPME school would likely increase the level of competition to get into joint schools and billets, perhaps even requiring a screening board for acceptance.

Once the student timing and joint billet management problems are resolved, JPME programs can be shaped and resourced to meet throughput requirements and learning objectives that are focused on the purpose of preparing officers for joint command and staff duties. JPME programs will probably not need drastic change, but improvements in content, organization, and resources should all be considered.

Time is perhaps the most significant investment for JPME. Students must be allowed enough time to reach the educational objectives. The higher the expected level of learning, the more time is required for reading, writing, reflection, and critical thought. Compressing programs or trying to fit them into “free” time will reduce the value

of the education and the performance of joint staff and command officers. These officers are being prepared for assignments in which they will be required to collect and analyze huge amounts of information, define complex problems, and concisely communicate comprehensive options and sound recommendations. We cannot take shortcuts in their education because of pressure to get personnel back to their units.

Joint professional military education is vital to U.S. national security. Today’s complex environment is high risk and resource constrained. Senior decisionmakers cannot possibly see all the important factors influencing decisions and they need the help of the best prepared joint staff and command officers possible. The quality of the decisions made and the results of our military actions will depend on the quality of the advice provided by well-educated officers. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, *Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Two Decades After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2010), xiv.

² U.S. Congress, *Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986*, P.L. 99-433, October 1, 1986, Sec. 401, 100 Stat. 1025–1026.

³ *Ibid.*, 1029–1030.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, *Report of the Panel on Military Education of the One Hundredth Congress*, 101st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), v.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2–7.

⁶ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01D, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)*, July 15, 2009, Change 1, December 15, 2011, A-A-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, A-A-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *OPMEP*, A-A-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Another Crossroads?* 20.

¹² Joint Staff J7/Joint Training Division, “*The Joint Staff Officer Project*,” Final Report (Washington, DC: Joint Staff, April 2008), 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5–7. Also see *Another Crossroads*, xii–xiii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xi. Also see “*The Joint Staff Officer Project*,” 5.