The Pen and the Sword
Faculty Management Challenges in the Mixed Cultural Environment of a War College

By George E. Reed

The war colleges recently became the focus of both internal and external criticism. Continuing scrutiny is appropriate in light of their expense and importance as the pinnacle of professional military education (PME). Each Service maintains a war college designed to prepare lieutenant colonels and colonels for the next level of responsibility, and there are two “joint” colleges: the National War College and the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy (formerly known as the Industrial College of the Armed Forces). While they have different...
cultures at the institutional level, they share some common challenges and opportunities. This article examines some of those challenges from the perspective of an administrator, a voice that is often missing from the current dialogue, which seems to be dominated by journalists, bloggers, and civilian professors who do their work at the uncomfortable intersection of academic and military cultures.²

This submission represents a friendly critique submitted by one who benefited greatly as a student and then, after completing a fully funded doctoral program, as a faculty member. This perspective is informed by 6 years as a faculty member and a course director for two segments of the core curriculum at the U.S. Army War College, followed by an equal time as a civilian faculty member at a doctoral-degree conferring university and now as an administrator. Even with an admittedly favorable viewpoint, it is not hard to see that there is room for systemic improvement. After a brief review of contemporary critiques focused on the war colleges, the article turns to some observations from an administrator’s perspective.

War Colleges under Fire

Former Washington Post journalist and author Thomas Ricks launched a public salvo against the war colleges in a series of ForeignPolicy.com blogs where he actually called for their closure, describing them as both expensive and second-rate. While his criticism is sometimes hyperbolic and tends to be disregarded by those within the system, he raises some good points and serves as a watchdog of sorts as evidenced by his recent accounting of personnel changes that resulted in the reduction of civilian professor positions at the Army War College.³

Douglas Higbee provided a useful critical anthology from authors ranging across the system of professional military education.⁴ Daniel Hughes’s depiction of the Air War College in that edited volume was strident in highlighting a nasty strain of anti-intellectualism, ultraconservatism, Christian nationalism, and a largely disinterested student body.⁵ While some might reject the observations of an outsider such as Ricks, Hughes served for 18 years at the Air War College, thus providing an insider view. Some might be inclined to dismiss him as a disgruntled former employee, but regardless of his motivation, there is cause for concern if his observations have any merit.

Robert Scales, a retired two-star general and former commandant of the Army War College, raised an alarm by observing that the military could become “too busy to learn.”⁶ His essay did not address the war colleges specifically except for noting that the average age of attendees has increased from 41 to 45, making an expensive educational experience more of a preparation for retirement than a platform for leadership at higher levels. He decried the wane of experienced officers as instructors in the system of PME. His critique echoed some of the concerns voiced by Ricks when he suggested that a bias for action over learning and an organizational malaise in the schools have made them an “intellectual backwater.” His solution is to change the military’s reward system to elevate soldier-scholars rather than denigrate them. He advocated a return to the day when uniformed officers rather than civilian instructors and contractors are assigned to the schoolhouse, not because their careers are at a dead end, but as career-enhancing assignments on the way to even higher levels of responsibility.

In an especially helpful and recent book, Joan Johnson-Freese examines the war colleges and succinctly captured what she terms “overriding institutional and cultural issues” that hinder the accomplishment of their educational goals.⁷ A military penchant for training over education, counterproductive clashes between military and civilian culture, student attitudes, administrators who lack experience in running educational institutions, short-term contracts for civilian faculty, administrative bloat, and lack of faculty control of the curriculum all make her list of detractions. She is an insider who served on the faculty of the Air War College and Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies and is currently serving at the Naval War College. She rightly points to areas where the war colleges excel, and because of the level tone of her work, she is much harder to dismiss than some others who have contributed to the topic.

Comparing PME to Civilian Higher Education

It is important to note that comparing the war colleges to traditional civilian graduate institutions is a bit of an “apples to oranges” exercise. The best graduate program at a top-tier university would, in many respects, be a poor substitute for what should happen at the war colleges. The model for the war colleges is much more akin to that of a professional school (for example, law or medicine) where sophisticated craft knowledge is blended to a lesser degree with disciplinary forays more common to colleges and universities. The war colleges are not designed to produce scholars and researchers; they develop operators and leaders, albeit with knowledge and skills that are sometimes derived from graduate-level education. The adult learning model, seminar method, use of case studies contextually appropriate to a unique group of experienced practitioners, and the many opportunities to engage in no-holds-barred professional discussions with a parade of flag officers and civilian officials are bright spots that should not be underestimated for their positive impact on future senior military leaders. It is vital to have a place where military officers can delve deeply into the nuances of their profession and most importantly plumb the tensions, intricacies, and limitations of operating a large standing military in a democracy. If done properly, that very process can serve as a crucial protection of the Republic. Uninformed and undereducated officers who control vast amounts of military power can fall, or be led, into serious mischief.

Here is a dirty little secret we should consider as we seek the goodness that resides in our comparison group of top-tier civilian universities. Great and sometimes inordinate emphasis is placed on research and publication, which can detract from effective teaching. The ability to conduct...
research is a strong motivator for first-rate faculty members who wish to be tenured. Good teaching, however, is not usually that high a priority, especially at research-focused universities. Faculty members savor the discretionary time to pursue their own interests and require even more time to locate and complete extensive and complicated applications for grants to fund that research. There is often a much lower emphasis on high-quality teaching. The drive for tenure and how to achieve it consumes the attention and energy of junior faculty members, generating great stress. While most tenure evaluation schemes include teaching, scholarship, and service as elements of review, few are denied tenure due to mediocre teaching evaluations or lack of service on university committees. Research and publication are the long poles in the tent. Having firmly established the primacy of research through the socialization process, the more successful faculty members are, the less they will be seen in a classroom. Teaching assistants take up the slack. Despite the prestige of some civilian colleges and universities, many teaching practices there are not particularly effective.

Tenure is a double-edged sword. The PME system does not seem to recognize its importance in recruiting and retaining high-quality faculty members. Tenure is the brass ring of a budding academic career—a designation that delineates the serious academic from the part-timer—the professional from the amateur. A colleague recently suggested that no self-respecting competitive academic would be willing to join the faculty of an institution that did not offer tenure unless the rate of compensation and likelihood of contract renewal were so high as to offset the attendant loss of security. Short-term contracts subject to renewal at the whims of nonacademics and the vagaries of a vacillating defense budget are no way to hire the best and brightest. There is also a relationship between tenure and academic freedom. Those who cannot be fired for their opinions as long as they are expressed within the norms of responsible academic practice can become effective and useful gadflies. The lack of such protection can have a chilling effect on speaking truth to power, a role the war colleges might well serve.

Having noted the necessity of tenure or a tenure-like system for both academic freedom and talent management, we ought to also take notice of the other edge of the sword. The accounts of abuses by senior faculty members who are protected by tenure but are unproductive or simply uncivil in their practices are legion in higher education. Indeed, there are opportunities for post-tenure review at some institutions or triggered reviews prompted by serious misconduct, but they are rare and a great deal of poor practice is tolerated before consideration is given to initiating them. Behavior is routinely tolerated in the system of civil educational institutions that would invariably and justifiably involve contract termination or nonrenewal in the PME system.

**Faculty Talent Management**

It is appropriate to focus on the concept of academic talent management because of the centrality of the quality of the faculty to the effectiveness of any educational institution including the PME system. This concept seems to be lost on some administrators in military organizations. That is understandable in a system in which Servicemembers are easily exchanged or replaced and the personnel system routinely generates replacements for vacancies on demand. Servicemembers engage in permanent change of station moves regularly, and the kind of personnel churn that would debilitating most educational institutions is accepted as routine. No one person is irreplaceable in a military formation, and it is unknown when another might become a casualty. Attracting and retaining academic talent, however, is a competitive sport that the PME system plays at significant disadvantage. Hiring and retention are also some of the most important activities an administrator engages in. Recent experience as the chair or member of several search committees for both junior and senior faculty positions provokes reflection on the differences when one is recruiting academics. Let us briefly examine seven ways the PME system is disadvantaged in the marketplace for academic talent in addition to the issue of tenure: access to outside employment, compensation, copyright restrictions, quality of infrastructure, ability to teach in an area of expertise, faculty governance and curriculum oversight, and hiring practices.

**Access to Outside Employment.** In the Federal system, outside employment is either prohibited outright or significantly constrained by 5 C.F.R., Part 2635, Subpart F. At the very least, permission must be obtained ahead of time and in some cases an ethics finding from an attorney is advisable. University and departmental policies on outside employment vary as do practices by discipline, but many professors significantly augment their salaries through consulting or additional teaching. In many civilian schools, outside employment is not only permitted but also encouraged as a means of expanding the reputation and reach of the institution. Faculty members are permitted to engage in outside employment without restriction provided they give first priority to their university duties. Since professors are not expected to be in their offices on a daily basis, faculty members who strategically construct their teaching schedules can build a lucrative consulting practice. Because they are serving 9-month contracts, faculty members have time in the summer to pursue outside work or consulting. Faculty members who choose to teach courses during summer months or teach more than their assigned faculty load are paid a healthy stipend. Moreover, at civilian institutions, if faculty members are asked to perform additional work beyond their contractual teaching load, such as providing presentations or workshops, they are paid extra, usually in the form of a stipend or honorarium. Howard Wiarda reports being frequently “tasked” to give lectures beyond the terms of his contract at the National War College. It would not occur to most administrators of military educational facilities to provide additional stipends on top of salary for such activities.

**Compensation.** The war colleges place emphasis on pay equity across
departments with allowance for seniority. In one sense that is appropriate since instructors are doing the same kinds of daily work. While Federal pay scales look generous in some fields (for example, history and the humanities), in other fields they are not nearly as attractive. At civilian universities it is accepted without question that management professors in the school of business will receive much higher salaries than history professors in the college of arts and sciences. That holds true within interdisciplinary departments as well. A professor who comes from the field of public policy will be paid more than one who comes from education even though they are working in the same department. Civilian institutions sometimes find creative ways to compensate faculty members beyond salary. Home-buying assistance, noncontributory retirement plans, mass transit assistance, reduced teaching load, and tuition remission for family members are but a few examples.

**Copyright Restrictions.** The application of copyright rules varies by Service and interpretations vary by legal advisor, but the general rule is that materials produced by employees of Federal agencies are considered to be in the public domain and are not subject to copyright protection. Work that is prepared by an officer or employee of the U.S. Government cannot be copyrighted in accordance with Chapter 17 U.S. Code § 105. A conservative interpretation of this statute can have a retarding effect on scholarly publication. Most scholarly journals will only publish on the basis of copyright ownership that is conferred by the author. Faculty members in the PME system have in some cases gone to great lengths to establish that their published works are not works of the government. They will work at home on personal computers and assiduously avoid materials or resources that could be construed to be part of their government work. In some cases, there is institutional winking going on around this subject since publishing enhances the prestige of the institution. None of this is an issue in civilian academic institutions. Research funded by university grants, or inherently part of classroom or scholarly effort, is fully subject to copyright by the civilian professor. Academic publishing is not particularly lucrative, but royalties from published works can augment salaries.

**Quality of Infrastructure.** A good number of the facilities in the PME system, at least as far as the war colleges are concerned, are aging, retrofitted, and in some cases overstuffed. Many of the faculty members share offices or cubicles. For military personnel who have spent significant time deployed or in the field, such accommodations are nothing to complain about, but the quality of facilities is an element of the larger issue of work environment and quality of life. College campuses vary along a spectrum from functional to beautiful, but it would not be hard to assert that civilian colleges and universities have an edge in this category. Faculty members at the Army War College shared small offices with other faculty members. Consultations with students involved whispered conversations or gracious exits by office mates.

**Ability to Teach in an Area of Expertise.** Many academics are specialists. They strive to become experts and develop a deep level of knowledge about something. That something might change over time, and their breadth of knowledge might expand, but good academics work hard to establish and maintain a strong foundation in disciplinary knowledge. Entire academic careers are made on niche knowledge that can be arcane in some cases but valuable for its depth in others. Former dean of the Army War College Jeffrey McCausland once sagely suggested that the first loyalty of academics is to their disciplines. My economist colleague can always be counted on to advocate for what that discipline brings to the scholastic table, and another colleague who has built a career in K-12 education speaks forcefully for that program.

Now imagine a new teacher arriving at a war college to find out he is to teach subjects far outside the boundaries of his discipline and, in fact, the only time he would have the opportunity to teach in his beloved area of expertise is during an abbreviated elective period. A personal example might illustrate the point. I graduated with a Ph.D. in public policy analysis and administration, a subject I came to appreciate and enjoy. My teaching duties largely centered on three elements of the core curriculum: the first block addressed cognitive skills associated with strategic thinking, the second was oriented to strategic leadership, and the third focused on defense systems and processes such as Department of Defense budgeting, force management, and acquisition. While I came to thoroughly enjoy the first two blocks and loved teaching in general, I detested the block of instruction on defense processes. While such processes are arguably important and something that senior military leaders should understand (points that are continuously drummed into the heads of the students who were not particularly enthusiastic about the subjects either), they were outside my range of expertise and my boundaries of interest.

**Faculty Governance and Curriculum Oversight.** The war colleges place inordinate emphasis on the curriculum that is derived largely from the top down. At most civilian universities, the curriculum belongs to the faculty. There are processes for faculty voice and indeed veto when it comes to new programs and courses, course modifications, and cancellations. Faculty control of the curriculum is a jealously guarded prerogative that can frustrate administrators. Administrators have an important role, especially regarding resource considerations and limitations, but getting heavy handed with curricular issues is a pathway to a vote of no-confidence from the faculty, a concept that is foreign in PME. There are advantages to this kind of bottom-up system. It is easy to argue that those who are experts in their fields ought to control the content of their courses. It can admittedly also be a recipe for stagnation and immunity to necessary change. While there is a variable amount of faculty voice in the curriculum at the war colleges, it is remarkably diminished in comparison to many civilian institutions of higher education. The war colleges serve one customer, the Department of Defense, and responsiveness to the needs of that
customer drives top-down processes such as joint PME accreditation standards and demands from the joint and Service staffs that compete with what the faculty might see as good educational practice. Faculty voice is muted in the PME system as evidenced by an absence of the organs that provide the means for involvement, such as faculty senates or assemblies.

**Hiring Practices.** Quite frankly, the hiring practices of most civilian personnel offices are slow, bureaucratic, and sometimes unfriendly. When preparing to retire in 2007, I sent an application for an open faculty position to a PME institution. My first contact from it was over 90 days later when I received an email telling me that a relocation allowance would not be provided. By the time I received that notice, I had interviewed at several civilian academic institutions and already accepted an offer of employment. In contrast, when my institution opens a faculty search, it becomes a personal matter. We send letters and notices to individuals we think would be a good fit and court them. When they visit our campus, we wine and dine them and reimburse their expenses, if they have any that we have not already covered, without requiring forms and signatures from the candidate.

Hiring decisions involve a great deal of faculty voice in civilian institutions. The search committee, composed of faculty members from across the school and a student representative, screens applications, manages campus visits, and makes a recommendation for hire only after every faculty member who chooses to comment has that opportunity. Students give input on the quality of the candidate’s teaching presentation and staff members are queried as to their experience with the candidate. If the position involves a senior faculty candidate who already has tenure at another institution, the Appointment, Reappointment, Rank, and Tenure Committee reviews candidate qualifications and makes a recommendation for or against the award of tenure before the dean, in consultation with the provost, makes an offer of employment. The dean of the school conducts the final negotiations and extends the official offer in consultation with the provost.

If going head to head with a war college in a competition for an accomplished civilian faculty member, the contest would likely be decided after a discussion about tenure alone, but if the potential faculty member were not convinced, the discussion could turn to these seven points. The war colleges can attract a form of second-tier academic, the kind who teaches well but fails the tenure review because he lacks a record of meaningful scholarship. After all, the war colleges are not much interested in research or scholarship. Wiarda states it succinctly: “The National War College places almost no emphasis on research. It honors research and publication in the breach, in theory, but it sees no relevance for the research that the faculty does to its primary mission, which is teaching.”14 War colleges sometimes have a department that focuses on publication, such as the Army’s Strategic Studies Institute, which is staffed with talented authors who produce insightful opinion pieces and geopolitical essays, but few teaching faculty members are supported, encouraged, or rewarded for engaging in the kind of scholarly work that would be expected as terms of employment at most colleges and universities.

Yet the war colleges do manage to attract some outstanding civilian faculty members including those who are research and publication oriented. The frustrations experienced by these academics have been well explored in the works of Johnson-Freese, Wiarda, and Higbee. To give some balance to the other side of the coin, let us consider some of the reasons why a civilian faculty member might gravitate to the PME system. Some are attracted by the location, perhaps because they have family in the area, a consideration that becomes more important with senior faculty members who have paid their academic dues and are in a position to relocate. Faculty members in the PME system are spared the pernicious nature of the grant economy that drives the pursuit of funding, which is highly sought after by universities but is also a distraction to those more oriented to providing a quality classroom experience than to funding research projects. Others might be drawn to the subject matter. For those interested in national security and especially the military, the war colleges provide privileged inside access that is unequaled in most colleges and universities. Some will be attracted by the opportunity to work with military officers and their Federal workforce counterparts. Working with such dedicated professionals can be rewarding, especially for those who enjoy working with adults. While academic life in colleges and universities can be removed from practice, the connection to real-world problems and the obvious relevance of a war college classroom can be quite motivating. We should not underestimate the social wage that comes from making a contribution to national defense. It can be gratifying to have a role in shaping and developing the next generation of national security leaders.

**Academic Leadership**

Those who focus on leadership in their teaching and scholarship are likely to agree that leadership is an important variable in the quality of PME. The Services have made both inspired and poor choices in selecting those who serve as executives of their war colleges. Context matters, and leadership success in one type of organization does not necessarily translate to success in another.15 This suggestion runs contrary to the military personnel system, which tends to regard senior officers as interchangeable. Selection for flag rank is not sufficient qualification on its own to serve as a college president, even a war college. Neither should it be a consolation prize for those who are not selected for combat command. The same goes for other lesser administrative roles as well. Successful completion of brigade, ship, or squadron command does not inherently qualify a person to be a vice president, chief of staff, provost, dean, or department chair. Such key positions of influence would benefit greatly from an understanding of the kinds of tensions that Hughes and Johnson-Freese identify. Demonstrated ability in academic settings should be a prerequisite for service in executive roles at the war colleges. Selectees should be deeply attuned and dedicated to the
primary purposes of the institutions they lead. They should also be incentivized to speak and act fearlessly by making it understood that they are in their terminal assignment for an Active-duty officer or on a specified term for a civilian. In that way, they would have no favor to curry with others, including superiors, as they would not be eligible for promotion to higher grades.

Most war college executives come to their positions with a successful military career behind them and little to no experience in operating academic institutions. Wiarda suggests that they have a deep fear of losing control to the faculty and a military inferiority complex that spawns controlling behavior. He further asserts that such behavior serves to disguise an inability of most military officers to succeed in a nonmilitary environment. That is a harsh indictment that belies the experience of a number of former military officers who are now successfully leading academic institutions, but his hypothesis on the fear of loss of control has some merit. Most Active-duty officers assigned to the war colleges are there for a short time compared to the civilian faculty. They can kick up a great deal of institutional dust that is unproductive in the short term and exhausting in the long run. Both civilian faculty and staff who are in it for the long haul can become adept at appearing to comply while engaging in subtle resistance that waits out the “temporary help” at the top.

The recent firing of the president and provost at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) is worthy of examination.16 NPS is not a war college. It is designed to provide advanced degree opportunities for more junior officers than those who attend the war colleges, but this case raises some issues that apply to other PME institutions. The first sentence of the third paragraph of the cover letter to the Navy Inspector General Command Inspection report speaks volumes: “The overarching problem . . . is that NPS chooses not to follow governing Navy rules, regulations and laws in the conduct of the majority of its programs, because it will not reconcile its academic philosophies and ideals with the governing standards.”

The report assumes that academic philosophies and ideals can be made to reconcile with Department of the Navy (DON) standards, and that is an assumption that can be questioned. Later in the same report, the Inspector General notes, “A consistent theme from the highest level of NPS leadership to the lower ranks of the faculty was that NPS cannot operate as a Navy command (and adhere to DON programs and procedures) because doing so would be in direct conflict with the business practices that are necessary for operating a university.”

It would be a reasonable interpretation of the report to suggest that the Inspector General saw an institution that had become too civilianized, academic, far out of compliance with Navy regulations, research oriented, and insufficiently focused on the training of naval officers. The report attributed the
autonomy given to the institution and a lack of Service oversight as a causal factor. If seeking evidence of the “military mind” that Wiarda asserts has hold over the PME system, we need look no further than the verbiage in the inspection report.19

The Naval Postgraduate School, despite being a reputable academic institution that was found by at least one accrediting body to serve as an example for others, was out of compliance with a series of rules designed to regulate naval commands. In a number of areas where the institution showed innovation, such as the expansion of programs to serve other nonmilitary Federal agencies, research initiatives, and hiring practices that circumvented a flawed civilian personnel system, the Inspector General saw outright violation of regulations, questioned the statutory authority, or asked whether the school should even be engaging in those activities. It is too early to tell what the Navy’s response will be outside of the firings, but it might serve as a bellwether for the larger question of whether it is practicable to operate an institution of higher learning inside the confines of military structure.

In the case of NPS, the president was a retired admiral who had deep knowledge of the larger Navy. He was not an academic by training or experience and had a lifetime of knowledge about the inner workings of the Service, yet he saw compliance with governing Navy rules as problematic when attempting to operate a world-class school. The Navy apparently has not taken the time and effort to craft specific rules that are appropriate for operating an educational institution. Even if they deserve such exception, the schools are a mere drop in the overall force structure bucket. Instead, NPS is expected to operate under the same regulations as an aircraft carrier. The same could be said of the other Services. From an academic standpoint, the war colleges tend to benefit from a form of benign neglect as far as attention from higher headquarters is concerned. As the president and provost of the Naval Postgraduate School have learned, there is a price for pushing the boundaries of such neglect too far even if the intent is to achieve academic excellence.

Johnson-Freese notes that it is not feasible to close the war colleges and move officers into academic programs in civilian colleges and universities. Not only are there insufficient spaces in existing academic programs, but also some officers are just not that competitive for admission to the kind of top-tier programs the military would want them to attend. Colleges and universities are not nearly as enamored with operational experience and demonstrated tactical performance. Prior academic achievement as reflected by grade point average and Graduate Record Examination scores is likely to factor into the admissions process for most civilian institutions. Reforms that address regulations and personnel practices that systematically limit the war colleges from reaching their full potential are better courses of action. An examination of some of the inhibitors to academic talent management listed in this article would be a good start.

The war colleges really should be, and indeed could be, intellectual centers of excellence with a mix of the best and brightest military and civilian faculty members. They have the potential to serve as incubators of big and even disruptive ideas fueled by cutting-edge research on important and relevant questions and dedicated to preparing high-potential senior military officers for the great challenges of our age. In return for the investment of national treasure that goes into operating the war colleges, the American people and indeed the Servicemen who will serve under their graduates deserve far better than mediocre.

Notes


2 Wiarda.


4 Higbee.

5 Daniel J. Hughes, “Professors in the Colonel’s World,” in Higbee, 149–166.


7 Johnson-Freese. 4.


15 Wiarda.


19 Ibid., 4.

20 Wiarda, 119–125.