

Letters

To the Editor: Over 40 years involvement in professional military education (PME) at virtually every level leads to me to applaud the changes under way at the National Defense University (NDU) as described by Major General Gregg Martin, USA, and Dr. John Yaeger in their article “‘Break Out’: A Plan for Better Equipping the Nation’s Future Strategic Leaders” published in *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2nd Quarter 2014).

The creation of a common core curriculum and academic calendar is most positive. The first promises to provide students the same joint PME materials and the proper foundation for what the Joint Chiefs believe officers at the war college level need. The second will permit students to take courses and attend presentations more tailored to their needs and interests, which in itself is an innovation that is sure to enhance students’ experiences—provided the long periods required for reading, research, and self-study do not diminish. Putting the most expert disciplinary and subject-matter faculty and research scholars in classrooms across NDU, just as the best civilian universities attempt to do, strengthens the quality of education in each college and for every student. Integrating explicit standards for leadership (“Desired Leader Attributes”) should provoke discussions that will help prepare officers for the ambiguous challenges that are sure to arise during the rest of their careers. Requiring a thesis is long overdue; the best way to prepare senior officers to recognize mistaken assumptions, inadequate research, sloppy thinking, weak analysis, imprecise writing, and unpersuasive argumentation is to put them through a rigorous research experience. This will arm officers against poor staff work as they rise to higher responsibilities and also permit them to better advise and support their civilian superiors and better implement the resulting policies and decisions. And last, increasing rigor (really, standards) for

students promotes more critical and original thinking to the benefit of national defense in every respect.

But three items deserve mention or further discussion.

What puzzles me, first, is the lack of mention of the study of war in the changes under way. Certainly nearly every course at NDU touches to some degree upon war, the understanding of which constitutes the central purpose of all the colleges. But to focus on change without direct connection to the study of war in all of its various manifestations might mislead not only the faculty and administration but the students as well.

Second, to focus the study of war on “lessons from the past decade of war” (the only explicit mention of the subject) seems most unwise. At this early date, there seems little agreement or even much study and discussion of the meaning of our most recent experience. As Mark Twain was reputed to have said, “It’s not what you don’t know that hurts you. It’s what you know that just ain’t so.” To think that one moment in time, in the long history of human conflict, is more relevant than the larger human experience is almost sure to mislead students, and dangerously so. Indeed to focus the curricula so relentlessly on the future may also mislead them, as though the University, in spite of the enormous talent and expertise of its faculty, can know or even discern the future. Our record as a country in predicting the time and place of future conflict, and its character, has not been good. And finally, to think there are “lessons” (as opposed to insights, or ideas, or suggestions) in human experience lends an authority or even science to the study of the past that historians know to be false.

Third, an expanded focus on students must not come at the expense of time for faculty to keep up in their fields and to pursue their own research. Both are indispensable to excellence in teaching. Furthermore, the University will not

attract or retain faculty comparable to the best civilian professional schools unless there is the requirement that they expand their expertise and achieve professional recognition. Without such a faculty, and without emphasizing a continuing effort to find and recruit the best professors, no amount of focus on students, organizational change, or new subjects and standards can maintain a top-quality education.

As the University implements the changes outlined by Major General Martin and Dr. Yaeger, it bears remembering that the United States has faced “an increasingly complex and dynamic security environment” and “severely reduced resources” several times since World War II. When the faculties translate these changes into curricula and courses—and classes, readings, case studies, and the like—they must not abandon the subjects, disciplines, methodologies, and approaches upon which the Profession of Arms, and the formulation of policy and strategy, have always rested. JFQ

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To the Editor: I write in response to the article written by Major General Gregg F. Martin, USA, and John W. Yeager, “‘Break Out’: A Plan for Better Equipping the Nation’s Future Strategic Leaders” in *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2nd Quarter 2014). The curriculum changes at the National Defense University (NDU) that the authors outline appear to support a mandate from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the worthy goal of better preparing future leaders. But the plan essentially takes key elements of education out of the hands of the colleges in the name of a “whole

of University” approach. The authors, the NDU president and its provost, respectively, have the power to institute the changes they propose, but the side effects of their measures could result in confusing or diluting the coherence of each of the five colleges they supervise. Moreover, while they criticize the lack of rigor in the schools’ programs, there is scant evidence that any of the civilian professional schools they seek to emulate owe their success to changes instituted or directed from outside the schools themselves. The authors rightly point out the difficulties involved in bringing about the changes outlined, a process of probably 2 or more years to become established at which point both of the two principal proponents, the Chairman and NDU president, will no doubt have moved on.

There is not enough detail on the phases of the new program to comment specifically, but the first phase appears to be the most consequential and also the most problematic. It is most consequential because it contains the joint professional military education (JPME) requirements, the Chairman’s Desired Learning Attributes (on gender, ethics, and the profession of arms), and lessons from the past decade of war, following directly the Chairman’s guidance. It is most problematic because of the manner in which it essentially takes control of those subjects away from each school’s curriculum—as if those subjects were not endemic to each school’s mission—and plans to assign as the teachers, subject matter experts, “whether they currently are assigned teaching, research, or administrative duties.” On this latter issue, either these administrative and research personnel are not fully occupied in their own jobs, or the concept is to have them pop into the seminars for only brief periods. In either case that part of the proposal is unsound pedagogically and not supportable as a continuing condition, in spite of its seeming allure of involving the best people.

The change proposed by this first phase cannot but negatively affect the morale of the faculties of the five schools and thus their effectiveness. The

Chairman’s guidance may well have identified key areas that need improvement and additional attention, but if academic change is needed, put people in charge in each of the schools to direct those changes. Instead, the proposal aims to direct change imposed on the faculties by a higher headquarters, all under the hollow rubric of cost savings. NDU is a military organization, but it is one made up of schools, not battalions or squadrons, and it makes a difference. If an objective is to increase rigor and raise academic standards in the schools, reducing their influence and control of the curriculum is not the way to do it.

Finally, changing curricula to maintain relevance is a slippery slope. Every age thinks it is increasingly complex, and it is dangerous to assume the last 10 years presage the next 10. When the authors cite as a common criticism the curriculum as focused “on military history and the immutable principles of war and not enough on critical thinking skills relevant to current issues,” they are engaging in rhetoric without much meaning. First, I have no idea what those immutable principles are and who teaches them. Second, changing the focus from history to critical thinking is as false a dichotomy as I have ever heard. In short, the changes outlined have the real possibility of confusing, not enhancing, the education of the students and the role of each of the schools. JFQ

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by Michael J. Meese



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