The Education of Mid-Career Army Officers: Building Competency through Professional Military Education

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Introduction

The United States Army considers mid-career officers as its operational backbone. Those in the rank of major influence the planning and execution of operations ranging from battalion to the division levels of command. Associated with this rank comes an expectation of professional excellence. U.S. Army leadership expects its majors to think creatively and innovatively to solve complex problems in this era of persistent conflict, where ambiguity and unknowns characterize the future of Army operations. In essence, the Army expects its majors to be “Iron.” Iron Majors do their unit’s heavy lifting, as they are responsible for drafting war plans, coordinating logistics capability, and managing administration and personnel. However, what prepares these officers for the future operational responsibility the Army charges them to fulfill? How does the Army’s professional military education (PME) framework engender the qualities needed in the Iron Major? Is the PME framework, largely dependent on Ft. Leavenworth’s Command and General Staff College (CGSC), educating major’s to succeed in future ambiguous combat environments? This Literature Review first assesses the history associated with the development of PME. Second, this review provides an overview of the current benefits associated with Intermediate Level Education (ILE) at CGSC. Finally, this review assesses the current debate and controversial aspects surrounding PME for the future.

History of Practice
The development of the U.S. Army’s professional military education framework dates back to the early 1800s. Prior to 1800, an Army officer’s education in military affairs occurred largely through practical experience (Arnold 1994). In 1802, the Army established its first pre-commissioning educational institution at West Point, however prior to the Civil War the Army lacked formal military education beyond this initial entry level (Arnold; Efflandt and Reed, 2001). After the Civil War, the Army established its first formal staff school, the School for Application of Cavalry and Infantry at Ft. Leavenworth, KS. This school, however, failed to emphasize academic rigor. Its curriculum consisted of remedial subjects such as math and writing. It focused predominantly on small unit leadership and tactics (Arnold). Not until the Root Reforms of the late-19th and early-20th Century did the Army take mid-career officer education seriously.

In the wake of the Spanish-American War, the Army found its officers ill prepared for the challenges associated with mobilizing large military units (Arnold). As a result, President Theodore Roosevelt charged Secretary of War Elihu Root with assessing the Army’s failures. Root’s recommendations included increasing the size of each West Point class to introduce a larger number of officers into the active duty, developing a formal staff school at Ft. Leavenworth focused on operational support, and formally establishing an Army War College to instruct the Army’s future strategic leaders (Burns 2004; Arnold). During this period, the Army formally institutionalized the idea of progressive military education, which maintained relatively consistent until after WWII (Arnold).

In the post-WWII era, the Army made revolutionary changes to its PME structure. Changes in technology, tactics, and doctrinal concepts necessitated change in the education of officers. The Army renamed the Command and General Staff School the Command and General
Staff College, and introduced inter-service, joint, and combined arms operations as major parts of the curriculum (Arnold). On the strategic education level, the Army introduced a five-college system for senior level education: the National War College, the State Department College, the Administrative College, the Industrial College, and the Intelligence College (Arnold). The Army affirmed the need for military education separated by periods of operational assignment (Arnold). This approach to PME maintained relative stability until the mid 1980s.

In the mid-1980s, two themes emerged that contributed to the reform of the Army’s staff and senior service colleges. First, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 congressionally mandated specific rules for the education of military officers in a joint environment. In the wake of the failed Iran hostage rescue mission and invasion of Grenada, Congress sought to institutionalize joint military education and improve its officer corps ability to operate in a joint military environment (Arnold). The second theme that emerged during the 1980s was an emphasis on creative, innovative, and analytical thought. In 1987, a panel headed by Congressman Ike Skelton sought greater integration between the military’s educational institutions and its civilian counterparts (Johnson-Freese 2012). Greater integration amongst academia promoted greater intellectual development of mid to senior grade military officers by harnessing the relevancy and academic rigor associated with civilian programs. With the requirement to operate in a dynamic security environment, the Army introduced officers at the Army’s CGSC to concepts such as national military and security strategy while encouraging them to develop the analytical skills and innovative thought required at the higher echelon of military leadership (Arnold). The reforms of the mid-1980s made a lasting impact on the Army’s staff and war colleges. The Army continued to emphasize joint operations and analytical thought through the post-Cold War
environment. The Army emphasizes both concepts today in its CGSC and War College curriculum (Joint Staff 2011).

Beneficial Attributes

A consensus attribute of the Army’s mid-career officer education is the emphasis on creative thinking and problem solving in the ambiguous operational environments of the future. In an article published in Airpower Journal in 1996, Steven Kenney writes that “the crucial role of PME will be to help future officers understand how the world is changing and to enable them to determine how the military must change to fit this new world” (Kenney 1996). PME must emphasize how to think about new models of warfare, not old models based on tactics and operational designs that may be unsuitable in future environments. The technological and human dimensions of warfare require a constantly adapting and innovating military apparatus. Adaptation begins with an agile intellectual officer corps enabled through the Army’s PME curriculum (Kenney; Shelton 2001). Analysts cite the German Military’s emphasis on PME during the Interwar Period as the catalyst to its military transformation (Kenney, Shelton).

The German Military underwent a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) during the Interwar Period. Historians characterize RMAs based on technological, doctrinal, and organizational innovation that results in sweeping changes in military operations (Kenny; Murray 1997). During the Interwar Period, the German military simultaneously emphasized PME throughout its entire officer corps, from the pre-commissioning and initial entry level to the mid-career staff college (Kenney). Pedagogy focused on practicality and independent thinking when incorporating leading technologies in tactical and operational problem solving. German PME emphasized that no correct solutions existed, and debated best solutions among small groups (Kenney). German PME forced its military officers to think differently about military
operations, resulting in warfare trends that shifted towards maneuver, combined arms, and blitzkrieg during WWII (Kenney). According to General (Retired) Henry Shelton, the lesson from successful military transformation is “the vital linkage between education, leader development, and the fielding of advanced capabilities” (Shelton). Military transformation is largely based on building the critical thinking attributes of the officer corps, though some raise questions regarding how effective the Army performed this task in recent history.

Controversial Aspects

Controversy over mid-career PME ranges from its organizational capacity to influence the entire military population to the types of skills PME should emphasize in its curriculum. Currently, the US Army is undergoing a major shift in its human resources approach to PME at the mid-career major rank. Due to the high operational tempo over the past ten years, the Army failed to emphasize mid-career military officer attendance at CGSC (Carafano 2008). Major General (Retired) Robert H. Scales calls the Army’s dilemma with CGSC attendance as an “intellectual backlog” where military officers have avoided school attendance in favor of operational positions deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Scales 2010). The Army culture shifted away from valuing education to one that placed higher emphasis on operational experience. Currently, the Army faces a dilemma of shifting the organizational culture back to one where it prizes educational development alongside operational experience. The Army must find a way to get the best and brightest officers through a CGSC course that emphasizes critical thinking in ambiguous operational environments. However, a second dilemma is whether the curriculum at CGSC actually positions Army officers for success in the future.

Numerous individuals criticize the Army’s approach to education at its staff college. An assessment by Major Matthew McKinley, a student within Ft. Leavenworth’s School for
Advanced Military Studies, appraised the Army’s staff college education in accordance with critical attributes for adult learning (McKinley 2005). McKinley assessed CGSC according to five key principles for critical thinking best practices. Though CGSC achieved moderate marks, McKinley ultimately concluded that the staff college based much of its curriculum on obsolete assumptions regarding how adults learn (McKinley). This literature review describes the details surrounding McKinley’s study in the annotated bibliography.

The final area that observers critically assess when considering the Army’s Command and General Staff College is the emphasis on strategic thinking. The Army’s current academic emphasis on strategic thought occurs at the senior ranks, during attendance at the Army’s War College in Carlisle, PA. Many, however, criticize the Army regarding this approach. They argue that strategic understanding and critical thought must occur not at the rank of Colonel, but earlier in an Army officer’s development (McCausland and Martin 2001; Flowers 2004; Carafano 2008; Allen 2010). All officers must understand the strategic implications of tactical and operational decisions. To prepare for success in complex future environments, officers must be educated in how to think about strategic problems. The Army must institutionalize the development of strategic leadership skills earlier in the military officer’s career, and more specifically during the staff college experience (Flowers).

**Conclusion**

Many uncertainties exist in the Army’s approach to its Staff College. However, the one constant that remains is the requirement to provide mid-career Army officers a quality educational experience that promotes critical thinking and analytical development. The Army must foster this development to prepare itself for the future – a future where the nature of warfare is largely unknown. As budget cuts loom and downsizing appears inevitable, the one
area the Army cannot dismiss is its PME. To lead the Army into the future, a generation of Iron Majors requires the best educational experience possible. The Army must provide that experience.

Annotated Bibliography

This journal article reviews the importance of cultural understanding and cultural competence in the future operating environment. The authors define cultural understanding as developing knowledge of statistics and figures for the region in question. They argue that understanding and awareness of culture are not sufficient to prepare military officers for the potential array of foreign environments they might find themselves operating in. They argue that building cultural competence, or skills, to operate effectively in foreign cultures is more applicable. In order to build this competence, the military’s PME system must provide the underpinning for cultural learning.

This article cautions the reader about the current direction of the Army’s Professional Military Education program. The author references the post-Vietnam era as a warning to the Army for its current institutional trend towards PME. The military culture after Vietnam de-emphasized PME, which resulted in an imbalance in the mid-career officer population. The article emphasizes cultural challenges with both the Army War College and CGSC in getting the right people to the schools so that the Army is preparing its future generation of leaders adequately.

LTC Arnold’s Army War College monograph does an outstanding job tracing the history of Professional Military Education. Arnold’s work tracks the nature of PME over three centuries and includes early examples from the Prussian Military. Arnold assesses the U.S. military’s PME evolution from the post-Civil War period to the Cold War. He offers recommendations on how the U.S. Army’s PME system can change into the future.

This article examines the education of potential strategic leaders as they progress through the Army’s PME system. The article emphasizes that education and training is a lifelong endeavor that cannot be satisfied only through the Army system. The author assesses the evolution and utility of changes to the U.S Army’s PME system over the past decade with specific emphasis towards the Army War College. At his conclusion, the author provides recommendations on how the Army Chief of Staff and War College Commandant can improve senior level PME in the future.
This journal article assesses the challenges associated with the U.S. Army’s current culture when considering PME. He cites shrinking budgets, lack of emphasis on PME in the operational ranks, and the timing of strategic level courses as potential barriers to successful military officer education. The author believes that strategic level education must occur earlier in an officer’s development, as strategic skills are required at all levels of leadership. The author also argues that moral and political issues are part of warfare, and should be given specific attention in officer professional military education.

This journal article argues that sociological concepts must be integrated into an officer’s professional military education. As the methods and nature of conflict change, officers must have a strong grasp regarding how sociological issues shape conflict environments. The authors call for this training at every level of military leadership as it directly applies to understanding the human dimension of conflict.

COL Flowers argues two points in his journal article. First, he emphasizes that leaders must understand strategic implications much earlier in their military careers. Leaders on the tactical and operational levels must have a firm grasp of how their missions next within the larger strategic objectives of the military. Second, he argues that the skills for successful strategic leaders are very different from those of the tactical commander. The Army prepares its leaders to be outstanding tactical leaders, however does not adequately focus on building strategic leader capacity until too late in the military officer’s career. COL Flowers argues that change is required by the Army in order to solve this potential problem.

This publication outlines the official Professional Military Education Policy as established by the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The policy outlines PME from the pre-commissioning to general officer level. It provides an overall basis for understanding how each level fits within the overall PME structure, to include emphasis on Joint military competencies and strategic leader development.

This article reviews the evolution of PME since the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 with particular emphasis on the various War Colleges amongst the military services. This article provides an overview of the various components of the War College experience from the curriculum, to the interest of the students, to faculty competencies. The author explores the concept of training vs. education, and whether the War Colleges are forcing their students to think critically and innovatively about strategic issues facing the nation. The author provides a list of recommendations for how the War College educational environment can be improved.
This article argues a linkage between a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and PME. Kenney proposes that PME must be geared towards new ways of thinking so that military officers are better equipped to meet the future, uncertain challenges of the battlefield. Kenney argues that the “brainware component” of a RMA is even more important than the “hardware component.” He links a historical precedence of a successful RMA to German officer PME in the Interwar Period. At the conclusion of the article, Kenney proposes recommendations for improving PME, specifically emphasizing the lifelong nature of education and learning.

The authors argue that strategic leader education in the 21st Century must take a different tone than in past historical periods. The authors explain that the nature of the strategic environment is more complex than during the Cold War era. Today, leaders must understand more because military and national security strategy in the 21st Century is not as simple as two decades ago. The authors assess the challenges of the current strategic environment and review factors that necessitate change in the current PME system.

This School of Advanced Military Studies monograph assesses the U.S. Army’s Intermediate Level Education establishment at CGSC according to five factors key for effective adult learning practices. The author asks five questions that he attempts to correlate against the best practices for how adults optimally learn. The questions are: 1) Do ILE and the Advanced Operational Warfighter Course (the second component to CGSC) incorporate critical thinking in their curriculum?; 2) What assessment tools does CGSC utilize for learners’ performance and expected performance in critical thinking?; 3) Does the program specifically focus on opportunities for self-directed learning?; 4) Does the program promote learning networks and learning exchanges?; and Does the ILE and Advanced Operational Warfighter Course provide staff training on critical thinking and self-directed learning and broaden opportunities for implementation? The results were mixed. The author found that ILE does promote critical thinking and the use of learning networks within its curriculum. Where the author found CGSC inadequate was in the lack of assessment tools for critical thinking performance and opportunities for self-directed learning. He found mixed results on whether CGSC provided staff training on critical thinking and self-directed learning. Overall, he concludes CGSC had not entirely embraced the adult learning practices of critical thinking and self-directed learning.

The author provides an overview of past Revolutions in Military Affairs and assesses their significance to the evolution of warfare. He provides an overview of the debate on what actually constitutes an RMA, as well as catalysts to the RMA process. The author provides a list of RMAs since the 14th Century, and correlates these developments to a military’s attempt in predicting the nature of future warfare.

Major General (Retired) Robert H. Scales argues that the military must reinvigorate and reemphasize PME amongst the mid-career and senior level military officers. He calls the current state of mid-career education at CGSC an “intellectual backlog” that will be detrimental to the long-term health of the Army. MG(R) Scales provides recommendations for how the Army can fix the problem within the PME establishment by emphasizing a shift towards social science curriculum. He also recommends institutional changes that promote exceptional performance at PME so that officer’s can truly value their experience.


General (Retired) Shelton argues that the U.S. Army must groom its future leaders to enable military transformation. He argues the necessity of the military’s PME system, but emphasizes it must continually adapt based on changes in global trends and the nature of conflict. He additionally emphasizes the aspect of Jointness critical in mid to senior PME institutions. His major contribution is to argue that in time of constricting budgets, the Army cannot place PME on the backburner. PME must maintain a foremost position to ensure the Army’s success in the future.


In this article, the author discusses leadership challenges and what qualities the military idealizes in a good leader today. The author then compares many facets of leadership between the military and corporate world. His major contribution is to argue that the skills to be a good operational or tactical level commander do not always translate to the strategic level. Strategic level leaders must develop a different type of skill set that the Army must groom earlier in the course of a military officer’s career. The author makes recommendations for the PME establishment focused on teaching officers how to learn, rather than telling them what to learn.