



This is a Testimony On [National Security and Defense](#)

20 Years Later: Professional Military Education

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**Testimony before the
Sub-Committee on Oversight and Investigations,
Armed Services Committee,
United States House of Representatives**

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My name is James Jay Carafano. I am the Assistant Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and a Senior Research Fellow for the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. "The [Pentagon](#) is currently undertaking a congressionally mandated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of strategy, force structure, missions, and resources. One issue that should be on the table is defining professional military [education](#) requirements. The current system is inadequate. The Department of Defense (DOD) should restructure it to emphasize a broad range of graduate education opportunities early in an officer's career." I wrote that in 2005. The QDR did not offer adequate clear strategic guidance for professional military development. Likewise, the focus areas for the current QDR do not appear to focus on this issue either. As a result, the services and the [Defense](#) Department continue to adjust to the realities of the post-Cold War world in an ad hoc manner. This committee has asked an appropriate question--whether such incremental adjustments make sense. I don't think they do.

In part, my recommendation was a reflection of watching the officer corps struggle with the challenges of adapting to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but more deeply it stemmed from the observation that military schools had changed only modestly since the end of the Cold War. Preparing to fight a known enemy required certain skills and knowledge, and professional education focused on those narrow areas. As a result, officer schools and development programs continued to train and promote leaders with skills and attributes to meet the needs of the 20th century, not future challenges.

As our men and women in uniform have answered the call to arms, our military schools have made adjustments--expanding curriculum on irregular warfare, homeland defense, and interagency operations. We should ask, however, what can be done to do better than just keeping up with what the armed forces are doing today.

The centerpiece of the reform discussion should be on senior -level professional military officer education. The reason for that is simple. The skills, knowledge, and attributes of strategic leaders are the most important product of the military's professional development program. Fundamental change requires making three difficult but critical decisions--strategic leaders must be educated earlier in their careers; where strategic leaders are educated must be greatly expanded to include civilian universities; and the scope of senior-level strategic education should be narrowed rather than expanded. In addition, we need to clearly distinguish between professional military education and national security education for interagency leaders. One cannot be substituted for the other.

When We Teach

The most difficult and important decision that needs to be made is when we instill the skills of strategic leadership in our military leaders. The current system still proceeds at a languid pace, layering on formal education every few years in an officer's career. The world is changing too fast to wait for that. The military model is outmoded. We need to instill the skills, knowledge, and attributes of strategic leadership as soon as leaders are prepared assimilate them--not just before we think they need to exercise them.

Likewise, today the military mistakenly ties senior education to promotion. In the 21st century, every officer will require critical thinking skills to operate in an increasingly complex environment with dispersed decision-making. Officers at all levels need to be able to analyze situations and make the best decisions possible in often difficult situations. Strategic leadership, knowledge, skills, and attributes should be a prerequisite because it provides the analytical skills necessary for functioning in dynamic environments. In addition, professional education requirements should be the same for active duty and reserve component leaders because they perform the same operational tasks.

The military defers senior -level professional military officer education until most attendees are over 40 years old. That is a mistake. Officers need this experience when they are young--before they are 30 years old--when education will have its greatest impact. Early education will prepare officers to: accept strategic responsibilities earlier in their careers; be better mentors; and be ready for a "life-time of learning" throughout their professional careers.

Earlier senior -level professional military officer education and the more frequent use of the military means something must give. The services will need to consolidate schools and rely more on short-term courses and distance education to train specialty skills.

Where We Teach

The next difficult decision that must be made is fundamentally rethinking where senior -level professional military officer education has to take place. While the service academies rightly remain the touchstone for pre-commissioning education, through the Reserve Officers Training Corps, future officers are also trained at colleges and universities around the nation. There is no reason why senior -level professional military officer education cannot follow the same model.

To build a well-educated, diverse officer corps, the military should use the free market. A requirement for educating a large pool of military officers will create a vast new demand. Officers should have a wide variety of options and opportunities. The primary goal of military education is to teach officers how to think. What or where officers are learning is less important than the types of skills that they are developing--skills that will serve them well in a wide spectrum of situations and conflicts. An officer can gain the same critical analysis skills from a political science course as from an advanced engineering

course.

In addition, the military's war colleges should have to compete with civilian schools to attract military students. Competition will lead to better services and programs as well as guarantee a diverse and well-trained officer corps. In addition, expanding senior-level professional military officer education to civilian schools will strengthen the bonds of civil-military relations.

What We Teach

Joint Professional Military Education requirements have become overly prescriptive. They are also growing. Quality is becoming a victim quantity. The current vogue of emphasizing "cultural" studies is a case in point. Reform proposals call for everything from Arabic-language training to negotiating skills to increased engineering and scientific training. These calls ignore reality. Operational requirements are leaving less, not more, time for professional education. Likewise, the Pentagon cannot be expected to foresee exactly which kinds of leaders, language skills, and geographic or operational orientations will be needed for future missions. The future is too unpredictable.

In the future, the attribute most needed by military officers is the critical thinking skills that come from a graduate education program. Thinking skills are the best preparation for ambiguity and uncertainty. Virtually any graduate program would suffice. In fact, the military should seek as broad a range of graduate experiences as possible as a hedge against unexpected operational and strategic requirements.

Rather than broaden the required curriculum, senior-level professional officer military development should sharpen its focus on only the most essential skills, knowledge, and attributes. The education core should be deep and narrow, allowing officers the maximum flexibility to round out their senior education in disciplines which suit them best. Arguably, the critical core could be reduced to three areas.

Moral and Political Instruction. Moral and political issues are part of war, not a separate sphere that military leaders can ignore. Officers will have to engage in the struggle of ideas against [terrorism](#) and other ideologies that may emerge in the 21st century. They will have to understand the political dimensions of war and the complexities of civil-military relations. Thus, every program must include at least some element of a classical liberal education to prepare leaders skilled in both the art of war and the art of liberty.

Network Science. A foundation in science, technology, engineering, and math are essential for any educated leader. In addition, the attributes of the 21st century scientist, engineer, and strategic leader share many traits in common. They must know how to work and lead teams; adapt to the demands of their work environment; and create and innovate. Such leadership cannot be learned through any single scientific discipline. Senior strategic leaders should have an appreciation and practice in network science and systems integration. Network science is a term of art that represents a multi-disciplinary approach to research that combines the techniques of the social sciences with "hard science" disciplines. Network science examines how networks function. They study diverse physical, informational, biological, cognitive, and social networks searching for common principles, algorithms and tools that drive network behavior. The understanding of networks can be applied to a range of challenges from combating terrorist organizations to organizing disaster response. This science will be particularly fruitful for understanding how any networks from a terrorist cell to an evacuating city functions as well as how they can be exploited, disrupted, manipulated, or improved upon.

Methods of Analysis. Arguably the most component of critical thinking and strategic judgment is the capacity to analyze complex problems applying cutting-edge analytical tools. As with understanding

modern science and technology, strategic leaders must be capable of a multi-disciplinary approach to decision-making that recognizes that there is no assured single path to knowledge. Rather, they should have the capacity for testing cause and effects relationships through several means. Multidisciplinary studies are not new, but they can be particularly fruitful now. The information age provides an unprecedented capacity to tackle tough problems in different ways.

Beyond Professional Military Education

Another reform often proposed is to extend the use of professional military education system as a substitute for national security education for the interagency team. That is a mistake and disservice to both efforts. National security interagency professionals must have three essential skills: 1) familiarity with a number of diverse security-related disciplines (such as health care, law enforcement, immigration, and trade) and practice in interagency operations, working with different government agencies, the private sector, and international partners; 2) competence in crisis action and long-term strategic planning; and 3) a sound understanding of federalism, the free-market economy, constitutional rights, and international relations.

Lessons Learned

While whole-of-government and professional military education are different, there are elements of the military system that are relevant to interagency national security professional development. The U.S. military faced similar professional development challenges in building a cadre of joint leaders--officers competent in multi-service operations involving two or more of the armed services. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 mandated a solution that required officers to have a mix of joint education, assignments, and accreditation by a board of professionals in order to be eligible for promotion to general officer rank. Goldwater- Nichols is widely credited with the successes in joint military operations from Desert Storm to the war on terrorism. Education, assignment, and accreditation are tools that can be applied to developing professionals for homeland security and other critical interagency national security activities.

Education. A program of education, assignment, and accreditation that cuts across all levels of government and the private sector with national and homeland security responsibilities has to start with professional schools specifically designed to teach interagency skills. Military schools cannot substitute for this requirement. The government will have to establish new ones.

Assignment. Qualification will also require interagency assignments in which individuals can practice and hone their skills. These assignments should be at the "operational" level where leaders learn how to make things happen, not just set policies. Identifying the right organizations and assignments and ensuring that they are filled by promising leaders should be a priority. Military commands including the combatant commands could serve as qualifying interagency assignments whole-of-government professional development programs (for non-DOD [personnel](#)).

Accreditation. Accreditation and congressional involvement are crucial to ensuring that programs are successful and sustainable. Before leaders are selected for critical (non-politically appointed) positions in national and homeland security, they should be accredited by a board of professionals in accordance with broad guidelines established by Congress. Congress should:

Require creation of boards that (1) establish educational requirements and accredit institutions that are needed to teach national security and homeland security, (2) screen and approve individuals to attend schools and fill interagency assignments, and (3) certify individuals as interagency-qualified leaders.

Establish congressional committees in the House and Senate with narrow jurisdictions over key education, assignment, and accreditation interagency programs, including homeland security and other key national security mission. Members of other key authorizing committees, such as the armed services committee, should also serve on these committees.

In 2007, Presidential Executive Order 13434 established the National Security Professional Development program. This order affects 17 federal agencies including DOD. It includes the kernel of establishing a suitable education, assignment, and accreditation program for national security professionals. This committee should support and urge the administration to continue with this effort. For the immediate future, the program requires a suitable governance structure and appropriate Congressional oversight. That, however, is just the first step. The administration and the Congress must establish more robust capabilities for whole-of-government professional development programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important issue with the committee.

About the Author

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