

Strategic Horizons: U.S. Professional Military Education on the Chopping Block

By Steven Metz, on 17 Apr 2013,

The American military is led by some of the most educated professionals in the world. It's not unusual for a retiring commissioned officer to have spent more time learning in the classroom than a physician, attorney or professor. All commissioned officers and a surprising number of career noncommissioned officers have a four-year college degree; many add an advanced civilian degree -- or several of them. This is bolstered by what is called the "professional military educational system," which is made up of specialized schools operated by the military services themselves. The most important are staff colleges, whose students have 12-14 years of service, and war colleges, which normally come between the 18th and 22nd years of an officer's career.

The American staff and war colleges were first created in the 1880s to mimic their European counterparts. They evolved and expanded greatly after World War II. The quality of the professional military educational system is one reason the United States has what may be the most effective armed forces in human history. But like all aspects of the military, the educational system is now facing cuts or major reorganization as the defense budget shrinks. While this is certainly necessary, it is important to understand what the professional military system does in order to distinguish good changes from bad ones.

As pressure mounts to cut defense spending, experts and pundits have proposed several ways to lower the cost of professional military education. One is to move away from traditional staff and war colleges altogether, instead sending officers to civilian universities for one- or two-year programs. Selected students today already undertake fellowships at universities and think tanks instead of attending the war colleges. This proposal would make that the model for all senior-level professional military education, thus allowing the war colleges to be closed.

In some ways this makes sense. Getting officers away from the military for a period of time and allowing interaction with people who think very differently might encourage critical and creative thinking. But the proposal also has serious problems. For starters, no civilian university teaches the purely military subjects like operational planning and military force development that senior professionals need. Recreating these sorts of courses at civilian universities would undercut much of the cost savings. Second, it overlooks the dual purpose of the staff and war colleges.

They impart a body of knowledge, which a civilian university could do, but they are also a bonding experience, tightening the connections among the American officers, U.S. government civilians and foreign military officers who attend. This would be lost if the staff and war colleges went away.

Another idea is to replace resident staff and war colleges with distance education. Rather than moving to one of the school locations and sitting in a classroom every day, students would combine guided reading, online instruction and periodic in-person seminars. Distance education is a growing trend in civilian higher education and is already used in the professional military educational system. The distance education program at the U.S. Army War College, for instance, takes two years instead of the single year needed for the resident course, but graduates of the two tracks are considered equivalent. The cost of shifting to a purely distance education system, though, is the loss of the bonding and network building that takes place in a resident program. It is also more challenging to recruit and retain a world-class faculty for a purely distance education program. And while a large proportion of educational resources are now online, not having access to a library or archives can be an obstacle in distance education, albeit a declining one as more library and archive resources go online.

A less radical idea is simply to send a smaller proportion of military professionals to staff and war colleges. While the Navy has been something of an exception, attendance at a staff college is normally a prerequisite for promotion to the rank of major, while attending a war college is required for promotion to the rank of colonel. The armed services could return to their old ways and decide that not every major must have attended staff college, nor that every colonel need be a war college alumnus. The problem would be deciding which assignments required a staff or war college graduate and which did not in a way that avoided creating a caste system where some jobs and some people in a given rank were considered more valuable than others.

Another possibility is a hybrid model in which students spend most of their educational time at a civilian university but with regular online or in-person seminars run by a military school. This would probably work but might not entail significant cost savings. It would certainly force the staff and war colleges to abandon their current status as accredited, degree-granting institutions.

Ultimately, though, any changes to the military educational system must be shaped by two big questions: What is the primary purpose of the system? And is having a less educated body of military professionals overall an acceptable price to pay as the defense budget shrinks?

The phrase "professional military education" indicates the duality of the system. It is designed both to increase the military's professionalism and to educate it. Those are related and overlapping objectives, but they are not the same. Professionalism means that military leaders share both a corpus of knowledge directly related to their mission and an ethic. Education suggests a broadening beyond the confines of knowledge directly related to the mission and the development of critical thinking and creativity. The current system balances the two. Most of the cost-cutting proposals sacrifice one component or the other. Losing either would almost certainly erode the effectiveness and morale of the military, though it is hard to know by how much. This also applies to simply educating fewer of the military's senior professionals. Doing so may not cause the United States to lose a future war. But it would diminish the quality of the military profession.

Historically, the military educational system was cut less during periods of declining defense budgets than things like force structure and procurement. The idea was that if the military had to be smaller, it should at least be smarter. This happened between the two world wars, after World War II, after Vietnam and after the Cold War. This time, however, civilian and uniformed leaders seem less inclined to shield the professional military educational system from cuts. The staff and war colleges have already lost faculty. If this continues, the future U.S. military may be both smaller and less smart. The United States could weather a bit of that. The challenge is in identifying the point at which a less educated military forces means risk and danger. We must cut, but cut wisely.

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