Reforming joint professional military education (JPME) has been much discussed and debated in recent years. At the National Defense University (NDU), the time for meaningful change has come. The University is moving out on reform. In this article, we explain the reforms and why they are necessary, and how they will be implemented. We believe they constitute an effective strategy for better educating future leaders for the joint force.

“Break Out” A Plan for Better Equipping the Nation’s Future Strategic Leaders

By Gregg F. Martin and John W. Yaeger

Changing National Security Environment. The environment today is not unlike the mid-1970s when the decision was made to consolidate the National War College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (now the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy) under the National Defense University. The Nation was coming out of a prolonged conflict and facing diminishing resources.

Rigor. Some believe that NDU should accommodate student welfare at the expense of necessary academic rigor. Even though the University maintains its academic rigor, criticism lingers that some graduate programs do not typically require a thesis and that our course effects may not transfer to better academic standards.

Why Change? Change is hard and some always question whether it is necessary. Skepticism is understandable. Real change that elevates an organization’s performance is rare. Many change efforts are all too conceptional and mostly cosmetic: shifting organizational boxes, titles, and authorities without effectively identifying, understanding, and addressing the key impediments to better performance. Any critical problem-solving effort must be based on an accurate diagnosis of the problem to be solved.1 Even well-conceived efforts often fail due to bureaucratic resistance or for lack of adequate follow-through. Those that do succeed often must pass through a brief period of relative ineffectiveness before they carry the organization to new heights of performance.2

We began with a candid appraisal of our circumstances and key challenges. The key is to make sure our strategy for better equipping future leaders is focused on individual learning outcomes for war-weary and battle-hardened veterans. While our curricula can be more current and in-depth, our standards are not sufficiently rigorous. Our curricula are not sufficiently rigorous.

In recent years, at the National Defense University (NDU), the time for meaningful change has come. The University is moving out on reform. In this article, we explain the reforms and why they are necessary, and how they will be implemented. We believe they constitute an effective strategy for better educating future leaders for the joint force.

What Change? If we hope to generate better educational output at lower costs per student, it is clear we will have to evolve and adapt. In the coming academic year, we will implement six major innovations to break out from our current educational model. These changes constitute the core of our strategy for better equipping future leaders.

Student Assignments, Tailored Programs, and Learning Contracts. Prior to the spring of 2012, most of our students now have experience in joint, interagency, and multinational operations, and some of our best young leaders in recent campaigns demonstrated a willingness to experiment to good effect. We need to make sure that our curriculum captures and transmits their successes in ways that illuminate general principles for effective decisionmaking in similarly complex environments.

Disconnected Research. Another concern raised about the management of the University was its expanding research centers. The good news is that the University maintains a high quality of life for our returning heroes with an academic year, we are implementing the Chairman’s Joint Education Review, and planning process, participated in the Chairman’s Joint Education Review, and moved through a series of scheduled external review and accreditation events.

In the past 2 years, NDU has absorbed significant funding and personnel cuts, like our partner institutions across the Department of Defense. During the same period we have prepared broad strategic guidance to our component institutions, executed an NDU “2020” planning process, participated in the Chairman’s Joint Education Review, and moved through a series of scheduled external review and accreditation events.

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Who are the “customers”? Our past three years of war. In October 2011, he encouraged NDU to begin reform. In February 2012, he personally rewrote the University’s mission statement. On July 11, 2012, he spoke at an NDU event, clarifying his intent that NDU should break out from its current way of doing business and better support our joint warfighters and the Nation. These concerns can change the world. Abraham Lincoln here at NDU: “As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew.”

In this vein, General Dempsey cited changes at NDU as a first step toward broader reform. “As we continue to advance [whole of University] initiatives at National Defense University, we will update the Joint EPME curriculum across the force to emphasize key leader attributes. We will also how best to adapt our learning institutions to serve a global Joint Force.”

Over the past 2 years, NDU has absorbed significant funding and personnel cuts, like our partner institutions across the Department of Defense. During the same period we have prepared broad strategic guidance to our component institutions, executed an NDU “2020” planning process, participated in the Chairman’s Joint Education Review, and moved through a series of scheduled external review and accreditation events. Now, in time for the upcoming 2015 academic year, we are implementing the Chairman’s guidance and seizing the opportunity to prepare our future strategic leaders with a program that is more focused on individual learning outcomes and better positioned to leverage the full range of talent available to the University. By collaborating more effectively across the University’s different colleges and components, we can deliver improved joint education at a lower cost to the Nation. In more detail, here are why and how we will do it.

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Major General Gregg F. Martin, USA, Ph.D., is the President of the National Defense University (NDU). Dr. John W. Yaeger is the Provost of NDU.
More specifically, we expect the following benefits from these integrated changes:

- The third phase focus on demonstrated problem solving under direct faculty mentorship, which builds on critical thinking skills instilled in the first phase, will help equip future leaders to operate in a complex and dynamic security environment.
- The first and third phases will draw upon the best talent from across NDUs to ensure students receive the best that the University has to offer in each subject area, including individual student research.
- Freeing analysis from the burden of teaching common foundational material will allow them to hire and focus their faculties on their areas of distinctive expertise, which will be more efficient and make deeper expertise available to students.
- The student-centric nature of the integrated program, which stresses attention to student needs, interests, and learning objectives, will increase motivation for learning.
- Working within a common academic calendar so that teaching, research, and outreach are mutually supportive will expand student opportunities to learn and get the best from the entire range of activities sponsored by the University.
- The emphasis on clinical, empirical assessments of student, faculty, and program performance will enable ongoing improvement not only for programs, but also for the students so they will continue the learning process after departing the University.

What Are the Benefits?

A few common themes provide the foundation for these changes. Talent from across the University will be marshaled in support of student learning as the first priority irrespective of whether a person’s primary job description is focused on research, outreach, or administration. There are many highly qualified faculty members and experts in our regional centers, campus administration, research centers, and diverse colleges who previously were not available to students—even if the student was intensely interested in their areas of expertise. Under the new program students will be better able to tap the University’s full range of expertise and our commitment to place our students at the center of all we do will be more fully realized.

Greater collaboration across University components is a corollary requirement of our student-centric program. The challenges and opportunities are interrelated and mutually dependent, as would be expected in a coherent organizational strategy for change. For maximum efficiency they must be administered together. They require a whole-of-NDU approach to get the best from the entire range of opportunities sponsored by the University.

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What Are the Savings?

One frequent question raised as we have debated the need for change is whether they really can be enacted within our current resource constraints. Put differently, how will these changes save resources? One thing our programs have already been absorbed, albeit at the cost of not vaccinating a large enough proportion of the population. Thus, we do not have to implement this program when making additional large cuts. That said, we believe this program is feasible because it conserves resources in several ways.

First, we are reordering priorities to focus on students. For example, the emphasis on student research and teaching support and research and student research rather than making research for its own sake the principal goal. Our research infrastructure is well developed in support of the Pentagon’s priorities and will continue to focus on applied research. However, their first priority will be students. Similarly, outreach in support of external requirements (for example, hosting visitors and providing a venue for conferences and other activities) will be a lower priority except where it manifestly benefits the educational experience of our students. By reordering priorities, we are increasing productivity by tapping the full range of NDUs expertise for students, which gives us a bigger educational bang for the buck.

Second, we are increasing our ability to pool and share our talents across the University. We will still graduate the same number of students, but we will need to reallocate shared resources and collaborate on projects to ensure we have the maximum benefit from the expertise we have. By reordering priorities, we are making sure we have more educational bang for the buck. The emphasis is on student-centric learning. The third-phase focus on demonstrating problem solving under direct faculty mentorship, which stresses attention to student needs, interests, and learning objectives, will increase motivation for learning.

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Barno et al., 17.

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