

Point Paper

Strengthening, Advancing and Embedding NDU's Joint Educational Transformation

Issue. What steps are needed to strengthen, advance and embed NDU's Joint Education Transformation as an enduring innovation?

Discussion. National Defense University (NDU) is making a major effort to transform its educational programs to better prepare students for service as the nation's future strategic leaders. In a time of severely constrained resources, continued emphasis on improving JPME is a clear strategic priority, as we cannot "buy back" lost opportunities to prepare leaders for strategic duties and responsibilities. As a percentage of the Department's overall budget, JPME represents a tiny fraction, yet its potential contribution is enormous. In the interwar period, with few funds available to modernize the armed forces, a vibrant and challenging PME system set conditions for victory in WWII – the ultimate low cost, high-payoff investment. In the same way, NDU's JET is focused on delivering better JPME by enhancing individual learning outcomes and leveraging the full range of NDU's talent. The intent is to provide better academic content and an improved learning experience for students despite fewer resources.¹

Strategy: NDU's change strategy is designed to deliver improved joint education at less cost to the Nation through six key elements:

1. **Student assessments and learning plans.** Students review their careers to date with faculty mentors and identify topics of particular relevance to their careers and ways to integrate them into the students' educational experiences. The decisions are codified in a learning contract that will be reviewed periodically and at the end of the academic year.
2. **First Phase: Foundational Expertise.** The first six weeks of the academic year cover foundational material taught by the best subject matter experts at NDU. The material will cover statutory JPME requirements and introduce the BOV's Desired Leader Attributes, including ethics and the profession of arms, and lessons from the past decade of war.
3. **Second Phase: Specialized Expertise.** This longest portion of the academic year covers the core curricula of NDU's colleges. Freed from responsibility for basic material, the colleges can focus on their distinguishing areas of expertise and improve student learning.
4. **Third Phase: Personalized Strategic Leader Development.** This last phase focuses on electives and student research projects pursued under mentorship from faculty across the University. The research challenges students to solve a practical problem in an area of their choosing relevant to their career goals and possibly their next assignments..
5. **Program Evaluations and Ongoing Study Guidance.** Student feedback on all aspects of their experience is used to adjust the program for better performance. Student self-evaluations of progress toward learning objectives are used to identify knowledge gaps that their mentors

address with additional instructional material and suggested readings before the students depart for follow-on assignments.

6. Common Academic Calendar. Some common scheduling rules allow all NDU elements to schedule activities of interest in time slots when students would be free to participate. These open periods can also be used to meet with mentors to discuss research or other topics.

An article in the most recent edition of Joint Force Quarterly provides more information on why these changes will provide a better education at less cost, and how they will be implemented.²

Major Challenges. Major organizational change is difficult. Most experts agree that change of the magnitude envisioned at NDU fails 70% of the time. Change can fail for many reasons, but some of the most common reasons are:³

1. Insufficient sense of urgency to overcome complacency and inertia.⁴
2. Insufficiently powerful and committed coalition to lead the change effort.⁵
3. Absence of an inspiring vision and compelling strategy for how change will be accomplished.⁶
4. Failure to sustain resources and active leader support to maintain momentum.⁷
5. Inability to prevent vested organizational interests from stifling change.⁸
6. Prematurely assuming success is assured before change is institutionalized and embedded in the organization's culture.⁹

To avoid the pitfalls that can doom major organizational change it is helpful to think of change management "as a marathon, not a sprint."¹⁰ It requires concentrated focus from senior leaders as well as senior leader continuity for a substantial period. Resources must be shifted from old to new priorities, and advocates and champions of change should be recognized and advanced while internal opponents are addressed. High volume, sustained communication is required from the beginning of the effort until successful change is institutionalized.

Embedding Change at NDU: Key Imperatives

The following recommendations address the most common points of failure in change management, explaining what NDU is currently doing to avoid these pitfalls and, where applicable, what the Board of Visitors (BOV) can do to safeguard joint educational transformation at NDU and make the current change effort enduring:

Communicate a clear strategy, vision and intent . The conceptual framework for the JET is sound and well articulated. The strategy, vision and intent have been widely disseminated and are broadly understood by staff and faculty. This communications effort requires a steady "drumbeat" over time, bolstered by internal and external champions. The BOV can help by:

- *Lending its voice and influence* in support of the JET in a sustained way, both to internal NDU audiences but also to external sources of support such as the JCS, Combatant Commanders, OSD and congressional leadership, top academic leaders, retired senior military officers and the public.

Establish a sense of urgency. The NDU-P and his Top Management Team have clearly expressed the urgent need for change at NDU, but “middle management” support is variable. There was widespread doubt for some time that major changes would be conceived and implemented. The widespread focus was on absorbing cuts in budget and personnel, and not on improving organizational performance. It was widely assumed these were mutually exclusive. When a formula for reconciling fewer resources with improved performance was settled upon, it came as a shock to many in the NDU family. NDU leaders will continue to emphasize the change imperative as a key element of the communication plan for educational transformation. The BOV can help by:

- *Emphasizing across all audiences the urgent need for improved JPME designed to better equip strategic leaders for their future responsibilities in an era of uncertainty.*

Create a change coalition. Change needs champions. The level of commitment to change among NDU leaders varies, which is normal under these circumstances. Typically, some will favor change, others will strongly oppose it, and some will remain uncommitted while waiting to see if it is likely to prevail. Currently, implementation of the change strategy is the responsibility of the provost and his office, but is being executed by college course directors. The change effort is overseen by NDU’s top management team (i.e. the senior vice-president, provost and college commandants and component heads), and is well underway. The BOV can help by continuing to champion the JET and providing strong top level support for:

- *Recognizing and rewarding* the efforts of NDU staff and faculty who have embraced change and are working to make it a reality.
- *Placing change agents in key positions*, such as component heads, academic deans, associate deans, department chairs and distinguished professorships.
- *Converting the uncommitted* through the demonstrated success of the JET and by emphasizing its irreversibility and inevitability – “we are not going back.”

Safeguard the strategy. Inevitably there will be resistance to change, whether overtly or indirectly. Some tactical concessions can be made in the larger interest of successfully implementing the strategy – but not at the expense of the overall strategic framework. If too many compromises are made the strategy may be undercut. Both supporters and critics will ask why they went through such a difficult effort for so little return. To combat this problem NDU has a) conducted an aggressive communication plan to explain the necessity of change and why the proposed changes will benefit overall NDU performance; b) sought public support for the strategy from Pentagon leaders; c) assigned NDU senior leaders responsibility for the details of strategy implementation; and d) created a mechanism to track progress on strategy implementation with regular reports to senior leaders. The BOV can help by:

- *Recommending a blue ribbon panel* of prominent active and/or retired government, academic, business and military leaders to validate the transformation effort and make recommendations to secure NDU’s long-term future.

Sustain resources and limit organizational “churn”. Budget and personnel reductions played an important role in driving NDU to transform its educational model to attain greater efficiencies. However, a stable budget and manning level will be needed to enable strong performance going forward. Implementing the JET will induce a necessary amount of short term organizational turbulence. Outside “churn” caused by yearly budget uncertainties, manpower cuts, and policy interventions will distract and deflect the change effort as NDU leadership orients on these priorities at the expense of the JET. Given the press of daily business it is easy for leaders to “take their eye off the ball” after mandating major change. Keeping focus is essential for successful organizational transformation. The BOV can help by:

- *Recommending SECDEF policy guidance* (and/or enabling legislation) that preserves NDU’s traditional student-faculty ratio and throughput
- *Stabilizing the NDU budget* at no less than \$80M, and manning at current levels
- *Recommending service policies* to ensure that NDU military faculty are awarded *joint credit* and selection for schools, promotion, command and SERB retention consideration at or above service averages

Ensure continuity in change leadership. Sustained tenure among senior leaders is critical, as is their replacement when due by successors who embrace and support the change program. Opponents will commonly “wait out” change agents to stifle transformative change. The normal term of office for presidents of civilian counterpart institutions can be up to 8-10 years. This enables them to oversee substantive change from conceptualization through implementation. While this term is not realistic for active duty general or flag officers, a five year term for the NDU-P and for other key leaders at the university level (such as the Chief Operations Officer) would go far to cement and embed transformative change. Sustained tenure for the NDU-P is recommended by both congressional and accreditation sources as needful for effective organizational change.¹¹ The BOV can help by:

- *Supporting the tenure of the NDU-P at five years* as a terminal assignment
- *Selecting a replacement* with the requisite strategic leadership, academic and leadership credentials who is supportive of and committed to the change effort

Conclusion.

The NDU JET holds promise for bringing about better and more relevant JPME in times of resource scarcity and strategic uncertainty, not only at NDU but across the JPME enterprise. The program is well underway, but as in other complex organizations, success is not assured. Continuity, sustained senior leader support, focused implementation and persistence will be needed to embed the gains inherent in the JET and make them enduring. The BOV can play a key role in promoting and enabling this important enterprise.

Notes

¹ From 2011-2013 NDU's budget was cut \$30M (24%) and civilian manpower was reduced by 74 billets (12%). A further reduction of 38 military faculty billets (20% of the total) was directed by OSD for FY15-19, although ongoing discussions may reduce that to 15 spaces. Directed early retirements among military staff will result in a more than 50% turnover rate for military faculty prior to the coming academic year.

² Gregg F. Martin and John W. Yaeger, "'Break Out': A Plan for Better Equipping the Nation's Future Strategic Leaders," *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2nd Quarter 2014).

³ James R. Locher III, an expert in organizational change and national security.

⁴ Kotter lists eight major reasons for failure. The first four are related to not building and communicating urgency. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 1996: 4-10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters*. New York: 2011.

⁷ Blanchard notes the tendency to resist budgeting for change initiatives. Other experts like Labovitz and Rosansky more generally note change is doomed if not followed by constant senior leader attention and resources. George H. Labovitz and Victor Rosansky. *The Power of Alignment: How Great Companies Stay Centered and Accomplish Extraordinary Things*. New York: Wiley, 1997: 58-59. Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Who Killed Change?: Solving the Mystery of Leading People Through Change*. New York: William Morrow/HarperCollins, 2009.

⁸ Kelman lists several reasons that explain why organizations resist change in general. Steven Kelman, *Unleashing Change: A Study of Organizational Renewal in Government*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2005: 24ff.

⁹ Kotter's last two reasons for failure are "declaring victory too soon" and neglecting to anchor the changes in organizational culture, both failures that are exacerbated by rapid senior leader turnover.

¹⁰ James R. Locher.

¹¹ The Skelton Panel recommended senior leaders serve at least three years in their posts, *except during times of great transition when four to five years would be preferable*. Witnesses at the Subcommittee's first PME hearing, interviews with current and former faculty members and commandants, and Dr. Jeffrey McCausland's 2005 PME study warned that short and unstable tour lengths for senior leaders have an adverse effect on PME institutions." Dr. Janet Breslin-Smith, Dr. Alexander Cochran, and Dr. Richard Kohn were unanimous in supporting the position that the commandants should have a longer tenure and that they should have an educational background in addition to operational experience." Middle States accreditation officials echoed this recommendation in their most recent report. *Professional Military Education Two Decades After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel*. (Washington, D.C: U.S. G.P.O, 2010), p. 87-119.