

# “Break Out”

## A Plan for Better Equipping the Nation’s Future Strategic Leaders

By Gregg F. Martin and John W. Yaeger

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 Nation within a new fiscal reality.

We want supporters and future students to understand and appreciate the strategy, so they can effectively participate in its successful implementation.

Our “breakout” strategy comes in response to guidance from General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), and a 1996 graduate of NDU. A firm believer in the critical importance of JPME, the Chairman directed the University to update its curriculum, and among other things, to incorporate desired attributes for future leaders and lessons from the past 13 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 the University, clarifying his intent that NDU should break out from its current way of doing business to better support our joint warfighters and the Nation. The Chairman’s emphasis on change evokes the words of President Abraham Lincoln inscribed on the walls

of Lincoln Hall here at NDU: “As our case is new, so we must 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 PME curriculum across the force to emphasize key leader attributes. We will also explore how best to adapt our learning institutions to serve a global Joint Force.”<sup>1</sup>

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 postured 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 less cost to the Nation. In more detail, here are why and how we will do it.

### 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 ill conceived and mostly cosmetic: shuffling 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 inefficiency before they carry the organization to new heights of performance. Not surprisingly, many people associate organizational change with administrative turbulence that undermines rather than enhances performance. The change we support will be real, substantial, and effectual.

We began with a candid appraisal of our circumstances and key challenges. Stated simply, NDU must better equip future leaders for an increasingly complex and dynamic security environment during a period of severely reduced resources. Our five colleges enjoy strong reputations and offer many opportunities for an excellent education, but a number of scholarly critiques in recent years point out that we can do better.<sup>3</sup> Although views differ, several criticisms are recurring, most notably that our academic standards are not sufficiently rigorous, our curricula can be more current and innovative, our education does not leverage

student’s prior training and operational experience, and our research centers can be better linked to our students.

**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 regional accreditation, critics note that some of our graduate programs do not typically require a thesis and that our course credits may not transfer to other top academic programs. The need for war-weary and battle-hardened veterans to recuperate and reconnect with their families is genuine and we support it, but we must try to balance quality of life for our returning heroes with an academically rigorous program.

**Relevance.** Another common critique is that our curriculum is focused on the past at the expense of the emerging future, on military history and the immutable principles of war, and not enough on critical thinking skills relevant to current issues:

*The current approach to the professional military education and growth of senior officers may not adequately prepare them to meet those coming challenges. . . . [O]ther than some adjustments to accommodate counterinsurgency doctrine, the professional military education provided by military institutions in the past decade has largely remained constant in spite of rapid changes in the world.<sup>4</sup>*

In addition, it is often asserted that our JPME institutions, once a major source of innovative educational methods, have “become an intellectual backwater, lagging far behind the

corporate and civilian institutions of higher learning.”<sup>5</sup>

These concerns are easily overstated, but they have some merit. Certainly we acknowledge the need to focus more on imparting leadership attributes demanded by a security environment that is “characterized by uncertainty, complexity, rapid change, and persistent conflict.”<sup>6</sup> In such an environment, leaders require multidisciplinary and adaptive problem-solving skills that prepare them to collaborate and innovate. 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 many national security organizations (or “customers”) believe that NDU research is a good value. They vote with their dollars, so to speak, and over the past decade spent increasing amounts to fund NDU research. Unfortunately, our students did not receive the full value of NDU’s impressive research capacity. The ability of students to tap into this wider body of expertise at the University was limited.

Adapting our educational approach and programs to produce better leaders would be controversial in the best of circumstances. It is even more so in a period of fiscal austerity. The overall resources available to NDU have declined by more than 20 percent in the last several years, from \$103 million to a projected \$80 million for the 2015 fiscal year. Across the University, programs have been canceled and faculty and support staff positions have been eliminated or gone unfilled. In these circumstances, “business as usual” must give way to a new paradigm. The key is to make sure our strategy for change clearly identifies how to produce better-equipped, critical problem-solving leaders while conserving resources.

### 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.<sup>7</sup> These changes constitute the core of our strategy for better equipping future leaders.

#### **Student Assessments, Tailored Programs, and Learning Contracts.**

Prior to or soon after arriving at NDU, students will review their careers to date with faculty mentors. Based on previous experiences and current career needs, students and mentors will determine whether it is in the best interests of the students to pursue one of three goals: a war college diploma, a graduate degree, or a distinguished fellow designation, which would earn students recommendation for possible follow-on doctoral programs. The requirements for each are progressively more difficult, but all will satisfy JPME requirements. The best choice will be determined by individual learning styles, previous experiences, and career goals—not by a predetermined, one-size-fits-all requirement. Faculty mentors will not only explain the core curriculum offered by the University but also work with students to identify topics of particular interest and ways to integrate these into the students’ educational experiences. A clear lesson from adult education research is that mid-career professionals must be self-motivated to learn and that they are best motivated when they understand and can participate in structuring their learning experiences. The decisions made by mentors and students will be codified in a learning contract that will be reviewed periodically and at the end of the academic year.

#### **First Phase: Foundational Expertise.**

The first phase will consist of a single University-wide core curriculum. These courses will cover foundational material that must be mastered by all serious students of national security. The material will be taught by the most talented subject matter experts we have at the University—whether they currently are assigned teaching, research, or

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administrative duties—in order to give students the best possible educational experience. The material will meet many of our statutory JPME requirements and introduce the Chairman’s Desired Leader Attributes, including gender perspectives, ethics, the Profession of Arms, and lessons from the past decade of war. During this first phase, students will pair with fellow students from other departments, agencies, and other countries to expand their understanding of alternative views and cultures, and they will exploit our Washington, DC, location for first-hand observation of diverse elements of the national security system.

**Second Phase: Specialized Expertise.** The second phase will deliver the core curricula of our five colleges. Freed from the responsibility to cover basic material, the colleges will focus on their unique and distinguishing competencies. The College of International Security Affairs will focus on international partnering and irregular threats; the Eisenhower School will focus on resource management and organizational performance; the Information Resources Management College (*i*College) will focus on the cyber domain; the Joint Forces Staff College, our southern campus located in Norfolk, Virginia, will focus on joint campaign planning; and the National War College will offer its focus on U.S. national security strategy.

The objective is to benefit students by strengthening the ability of each college to offer deeper expertise in its area of distinctive competence.

**Third Phase: Personalized Strategic Leader Development.** The third phase is tailored to individual leader development and will focus on electives. All students will complete a Capstone research project or thesis. This final phase of the academic year challenges students to demonstrate what they have learned in the previous two phases by solving a practical problem in an area of their choosing relevant to their career goals. Depending on the student learning plan constructed at the beginning of the year and knowledge of their next assignment, electives can directly support the research project or

assist the student with broader career goals.

**Program Evaluations and Ongoing Study Guidance.** Throughout the academic year, a concerted effort will be made to improve the way we gather insights from students about their educational experiences. They will provide feedback on all aspects of the educational program. Along with other national security stakeholder feedback, these assessments will be used to adjust the program for better performance. Students will also be encouraged to conduct a self-evaluation of how well they fulfilled their educational contract. An objective of this phase is to provide guidance to graduates for lifelong learning. Their NDU experience should continue after graduation. If there are learning areas or topics that students would like to pursue, relevant faculty will provide additional instructional material and suggested readings before the students depart for their follow-on assignment so they can continue the learning process. We consider this final phase of the academic year an important innovation both for its potential impact on students and for the University. Our five colleges have benefited from each of their student assessments, but organizations that are asked to evaluate their own performance tend to be biased in a positive direction. Centralizing, collating, and analyzing assessment results in the Office of the Provost will enable the University to identify areas for improvement and work together on whole-of-NDU solutions.

**Common Academic Calendar.** The final innovation is a backbone initiative that will reinforce the value of the preceding five changes. Too often in the past, students, faculty and staff were not able to take advantage of the many University events relevant to their educational goals because their schedules would not permit participation. Conferences, workshops, distinguished guest speakers, and partnering with research faculty were hampered by rigid schedules that allowed students little free time while on campus. Some common scheduling rules will allow all elements of the University to schedule activities that might interest students in

time slots when they will be free to participate. For example, if lunch periods and time slots for guest lectures are common across all the colleges, NDU components could target these periods for workshops and other events open to student and faculty participation. Alternatively, students could use these portions of their schedules to meet with faculty to discuss their theses or other topics of mutual interest.

### What Are the Benefits?

A few common themes provide the foundation for these changes. Talent from across the University will be marshalled 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 for our student-centric program. The changes we are implementing are interrelated and mutually dependent, as would be expected in a coherent organizational strategy for change. For maximum effect they must be administered together. They require a whole-of-NDU approach to educating our students. Doing a better job with fewer resources often means organizations must cooperate more across interfaces or stovepipes. This is true for jointness in military operations, for interagency cooperation in the broader national security system, and for educational reform at the National Defense University. Thus, we are modeling for our students the collaborative path they will need to apply later in their careers.

More specifically, we expect the following benefits from these integrated changes:

- The third-phase focus on demonstrated problem solving under direct faculty mentorship, which build on critical thinking skills imparted in the first two phases, 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 NDU to ensure students receive the best that the University has to offer in each subject area, including individual student research.
- Freeing colleges from the burden of teaching common foundational material will allow them to hire and focus their faculties on their areas of comparative 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 students, faculty, and programs will enable ongoing improvement not only for programs and faculty but also for the students so they will continue the learning process after departing the University.

### What Are the Savings?

One question frequently raised as we have debated these changes internally is whether they really can be enacted within our current resource constraints. Put differently, how will these changes save resources? Most of the cuts to our programs have already been absorbed, albeit at the cost of vacating or not

filling a large number of positions. Thus, we do not have to implement this program while 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 research centers will give priority to supporting teaching and student research rather than making research for its own sake the principal goal. Our research centers have always made responsiveness to the Pentagon a priority, and they 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 lesser 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 NDU expertise for students, which gives us a bigger educational bang for the buck.

Second, we are *increasing our ability to pool and share* our talented faculty across NDU. We will still graduate the same number of students, but we will no longer teach all foundational material with separate faculty at each of our five colleges. A common academic calendar, for example, creates opportunities to leverage expertise found in one component in other arenas. In recent years, we have already begun moving in this direction. For example, the National War College realized its students needed more exposure to economic issues. It cooperated with the Eisenhower School to obtain the faculty support for economics since Eisenhower has long maintained such expertise.

### The Way Ahead

At the National Defense University, we are committed to implementing the Chairman’s guidance with an integrated strategy that relies on the whole of NDU and places students at the center of all we do. Our students are experienced professionals; they quickly recognize gaps between theory and

practice and the inconsistencies between what they are taught and how NDU operates. If we emphasize the importance of the Chairman’s Desired Leader Attributes, which include “the ability to anticipate and recognize change and lead transitions,” but decline to lead change at NDU because it is difficult or risky, the students will know. If we teach the essential elements of strategy but our strategy for organizational change does not include those elements, the students will know. If we insist our strategy is student-centric and relies on a whole-of-NDU approach, but we do not offer students the best the University has to give, the students will know. We will not disappoint them. We will deliver the changes we have promised.

Change of this magnitude requires a total team effort for implementation. Many supporting actions remain to be completed if we are to present students with a significantly enhanced educational experience when they arrive on campus to begin academic year 2015. We acknowledge and welcome the participation, inputs, and suggestions from our stellar faculty—and from our friends and supporters as we prepare for a bright future. Indeed, the entire University, and all those who support it, must make these reforms a priority and participate in their implementation if we are to succeed. This includes our incoming students, who we hope will be encouraged to participate more fully in the change process after reading this article. At a minimum, they will now understand why we are moving out on educational reform and that we intend to practice what we teach. JFQ

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin E. Dempsey, *18<sup>th</sup> Chairman’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Term Strategic Direction to the Joint Force* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2014), available at <[www.jcs.mil/content/files/2014-01/011714102354\\_CJCS\\_2nd\\_Term\\_Strategic\\_Direction.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/content/files/2014-01/011714102354_CJCS_2nd_Term_Strategic_Direction.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> A key requirement for any good strategy is a penetrating diagnosis of the root cause of the problem or challenge that must be overcome. See Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Some noteworthy critics include Robert H. Scales, “Too Busy to Learn,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 136, no. 2 (2010); Patrick M. Cronin, “PME: A Strategic Education,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 94, no. 6 (2010); George E. Reed, “What’s Wrong and What’s Right with the War Colleges,” *DefensePolicy.org*, July 1, 2011, available at <[www.defensepolicy.org/george-reed/what%E2%80%99s-wrong-and-right-with-the-war-colleges](http://www.defensepolicy.org/george-reed/what%E2%80%99s-wrong-and-right-with-the-war-colleges)>; Kevin P. Kelley and Joan Johnson-Freese, “Getting to the Goal in Professional Military Education,” *Orbis* 58, no. 1 (2014), 119–131; and David Barno et al., *Building Better Generals* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, October 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Barno et al., 17.

<sup>5</sup>Scales.

<sup>6</sup>Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 25, 2013), I-10.

<sup>7</sup>In doing so we intend to emphasize elements from several common adult learning theories. See Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999).

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