What Our Professional Military Leaders Need to Know
Enhancing the Professional Military Educational Structure

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Abstract

There is renewed interest in and research on the subject of professional military education (PME), particularly concerning military officers. For example, a recent blog article asks, “Professional military education: What is it good for?” Several books, chapters, and articles have made efforts to answer that very question. This article takes a different tack. It asks, “What is it that a nation-state requires of its military leaders at the various levels of leadership (tactical, operational, and strategic)?” By implication, some educational requirements will be contextual—that is, dependent on the national culture as it affects the military; being contextual, these requirements cannot be generalized. However, this author argues there are general educational requirements for military leaders: how to think, how to make decisions, how to plan and execute plans, and how to lead. A PME curriculum that explicitly and comprehensively addresses these questions, regardless of methodology (e.g., history versus science), and that is scaled to levels of leadership, is a powerful way to apply an educational focus on making effective military strategy and policy.

Arma virumque cano. ([Of] arms and the man I sing.)
—Virgil, opening line from The Aeneid

A contemporary discussion of American professional military education (PME) is fraught with controversy before it even gets started. The subject itself is debatable and questionable. One can parse the term with interrogatories without being able to arrive at convincing or consensual answers. This article alone will not resolve the many questions, but it provides a point of departure for developing a theoretical map by which researchers and writers of PME can navigate
their arguments. To manage the scope of the subject matter, the article concentrates its argument and case on the American military.

This article's thesis is that the military is a profession and, as such, requires a professional education curriculum that informs and empowers the profession. The article proceeds in typical fashion to make the argument. First, it presents background on the subject of military professionalism. Second, it describes the characteristics of a military profession. Third, it describes the alignment of professional military characteristics and professional military educational subjects. Fourth and centrally, the article proposes improvements to the professional military educational structure that can enhance the connectivity between professional characteristics and educational structure. Fifth, it finishes with some observations on where PME needs to progress.

**Background**

The primary source on American military professionalism is Samuel Huntington's classic, *The Soldier and the State*. Huntington observes that not all soldiers are professionals; the officer corps, the key leadership cohort within the soldiery, is the part that should claim to be professional.¹ He based the claim of officer professionalism on three typical characteristics of professions: expertise, responsibility, and corporateness.² Expertise focuses on the management of violence in support of the state; education and training of officers is a major method of developing and maintaining that expertise.³ The American military officer corps cultivates these characteristics within a social environment that can be succinctly described as civilian control of the military. Taken together, these two phenomena, professional characteristics and subservience to civilian leadership, comprise the essence of Huntington's objective control theory.⁴ Over time, the characteristics have remained fairly constant, the one exception being the explicit inclusion of ethics.⁵

This is a narrow view of professionalism for two reasons. First, it ignores the professional attributes of both noncommissioned officers and civilians supporting the military; these people need to have similar expertise to officers, exert responsibility and

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accountability for their actions, and retain a sense of corporateness with respect to their actions. That being written, the remainder of this article will explicitly concentrate on the PME of commissioned officers.

Second, Huntington’s separation of civil and military domains, necessary for his objective control theory, has received criticism in the current era. Not only is it presently impractical to have such separation, but such a condition also likely never really existed, at least in the American case. The most recent statement of this argument is found in Jim Golby’s short Strategy Bridge essay that critiques Huntington’s theory in an argument that poignantly makes clear that civil–military relations are far more constructivist and relational (actually interrelational) than envisioned by Huntington.6 The main point of the new perspective on American civil–military relations and military professionalism is postmodern in nature. The military is not a profession just because it says it is; rather, its professionalism is subject to reformation and renegotiation as its environment and stakeholders change.7

The military, like any organization or group that aspires to professionalism, must establish two social contracts: one internally among its members and a second externally with the clientele it serves. The internal social contract exchanges individual-member compliance with organizational norms and rules of behavior for the organizational provision of knowledge and status (as a professional). The second social contract, coming closest to Huntington’s civilian control of the military, promises military services of a certain quality and ethic, and exchanges military acquiescence to civilian control for civilian recognition of the military as a profession. These contracts are sealed by the figurative handshakes of the participants as a form of social trust. This trust is the cement that secures in place the relationships among the contracting parties. To the extent that trust is developed or diminished directly affects the degree of professionalism afforded to the military by its external clientele.9 As Golby and others might argue, the relationships in both contracts are dynamic and interactive.9

Don Snider is most interested in the internal contract, which he notes must be regenerated from time to time as circumstances dictate.10 He observes that professional contract renewal is not assured, given bureaucratic dynamics within the military itself. Others, including Huntington, make a similar regeneration argument for external social contracts, with the executive branch, the legislature, and the public.11 The need for external approval of professionalism may indeed be the most important challenge to the American military because of decades-long tension among the key parties in the contract or licensing: executive, legislature, and the Armed Forces. Huntington thought the tension issue concentrated on political power; more recently, other researchers have concentrated on expertise and ethics.12

One central component of the discussion on contracting and licensing of the military profession, or any profession, has to do with the professional training or education necessary to graduate and maintain professionals into the profession. If both the internal members and the external clientele believe that the professional
education or training is sufficient to create and maintain professionals, then the social contracts are easier to regenerate; when these beliefs are in disagreement, regeneration becomes uncertain at best. Here, as with the issue of professionalism itself, the literature on PME is long and critical.

Most of the recent work on PME questions the pedagogy from both the student and faculty positions. However, Gen. Martin Dempsey, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tried to move the discussion from the pedagogy to the subject matter itself with his 2012 white paper on the subject. Emphasizing the specific characteristics of the military profession, Dempsey called for invigorating training and education to take into account recent lessons learned from the two wars in which the United States had been involved (Iraq and Afghanistan). He connected this effort with a renewed commitment to what he believed were the core competencies of the profession: values, military professionalism (basically ethics, standards, and skills), trust, leadership, mission command, and jointness. Dempsey’s competencies are additions to a far more comprehensive and foundational document on PME, the House of Representatives’ Report of the Panel on Military Education (also known as the Skelton Report, and hereafter referred to as the Report in this article) from April 1989. The Report effectively established, by congressional direction, the military’s PME system. It set out tiers of education and training, and an objective—to create a core of joint strategic leaders who could claim to be professionals. Thus, the Report must be considered an essential component of the external social contract between the legislature (and by institution, the public) and the military. The operationalization of the Report’s recommendations as implemented by law is the Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP). This policy is routinely updated to reflect specific educational and training needs for joint professionalization of officers; it assumes that each military service has its own service-specific standards to impart and develop expertise in service areas. The OPMEP contains very specific subjects that must be taught in PME at two levels: the intermediate (joint professional military education 1, or JPME 1) and the senior (or JPME 2).

What one realizes when comparatively analyzing the Report and the OPMEP is a complementarity between the two: the former very broad on what should be taught; the latter very specific on the learning objectives. The legislative client of the military professional has proposed a vision for an officer who is a skilled joint strategist. The OPMEP provides the learning objectives and tasks to accomplish the vision. Pauline Shanks Kaurin has added a conversation discussing this connection in her 2017 article, “Professional Military Education: What Is It Good For?” In this short but comprehensive review, she argues for a clarity of purpose for this education. Shanks Kaurin sees two possible paths: first, one of skills development for the next leadership level; second, one of intellectual development. She acknowledges the possibility of combining and mixing the two paths as an officer progresses through his or her career. This approach at least provides a base for theory. Following a similar logic to Shanks Kaurin, T. O. Jacobs and Elliott Jacques have recommended matching PME to leadership levels, a kind of
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requisite education-and-experience base for each level.\textsuperscript{21} Jacobs and Jacques observe that the most critical leadership task at each of their three levels (operational, coordinative, strategic) is “interpreting or understanding the complexity of the environments with which it (the military) must deal, in order to provide clarity about them to the next subordinate level.”\textsuperscript{22} One necessary means of being able to accomplish this task is through education and training. At the higher levels of leadership, Jacob and Jacques agree with the \textit{Report} that the means are more educative than training in that what is required is mastery of ways of thinking as opposed to ways of action. This blends well with Shanks Kaurin’s conclusions about mixing both approaches in a scheme of PME. I agree with these analyses and observations, and propose that we can enhance and clarify the relationship by tying in the characteristics of the military profession.

\textbf{Characteristics of a Military Profession}

As mentioned early in this article, Huntington’s model of military profession has three components—expertise, responsibility, and corporateness—all focused on the defining aspect of the profession: the management of violence on behalf of the state. Ethics now has evolved as a separate component; so has leadership—as witnessed in Dempsey’s white paper, among other works. These components are consistent with sociological theory on professionalism. In his literature review on professionalism, Andrew Rowland finds that while there is a lack of an authoritative definition of professionalism, there are convergent qualities dealing with skill, character, standards, and regulation.\textsuperscript{23} These qualities, in turn, provide one with ingredients for a generalized professional education program. Any such education program should produce individuals—professionals—who are skilled at their work, who follow and work according to some agreed-upon standards, and who are able to be judged or regulated as competent professionals (or not). Implicit in this recipe is the necessity to adjust the ingredients according to the stages of the professional’s career.

The American military would argue that it does just that. There are certainly stages (by rank) in a military professional’s career. There are standards, judged by fitness reports. There are even tests required for the various stages of the profession and within certain technical fields. Evidence of skill competence in the military professional can also be found in those same fitness reports. The military’s code of “duty, honor, country” transcends the particular service that adopts these three virtues as theirs (the Army), thus forming a strong foundation for ethical behavior; it is a foundation that is further refined by a body of law (the Uniformed Code of Military Justice incorporating the international law of armed conflict) that reflects the political culture of the United States—a nation of laws, not oligarchy. So where is the problem of PME? One major issue is that the military profession’s defining characteristics have not been addressed well by the professional educational system’s structure that supports the profession.
Matching Professional Characteristics to Professional Education Subjects

Expertise (or skill), responsibility (or standards), corporateness (or regulation), and ethics make up the core professional characteristics of the American military. These provide general guidance for a professional education system that would teach the following:

- leadership in the military profession, appropriately focused by level or rank;
- methods of thinking, planning, and acting in the relevant military environments (strategic, operational, tactical); and
- defining ethics that constitute good and moral military behavior scaled to the experience and level of practice in the military profession.

This is indeed what the OPMEP attempts to do. The following comprises the OPMEP subjects to be covered in JPME:

JPME (All):
- National military strategy
- Joint planning at all levels of war
- Joint doctrine
- Joint command and control
- Joint force and joint requirements development
- Operational contract support

JPME (II):
- National security strategy
- Planning at all levels of war
- Theater strategy and campaigning
- Joint planning processes and systems
- Joint, interagency, and multinational capabilities and the integration of those capabilities

In turn, according to the Officer Professional Military Education Policy, these are supposed to produce the following six desired leadership attributes:

- understanding of the security environment and contributions of all instruments of national power;
- anticipation and response to surprise and uncertainty;
- anticipation and recognition of change and lead transitions;
- operation on intent through trust, empowerment, and understanding (essentials of mission command);
- ethical decision-making based on the shared values of the profession of arms; and
- thinking critically and strategically in applying joint warfighting principles and concepts of joint operations.

The OPMEP then spends an entire appendix delineating in great detail the ways in which the several services provide these subjects and attributes across the levels (ranks)
of the military profession. In a very bureaucratic strategy, the OPMEP contains enough detail for everyone, while enabling (empowering in the mission-command sense) anyone to do anything under its guise. With such flexibility, curriculum development in the several military war colleges can proceed according to the specific needs of each institution. This is a desirable education organizational attribute, but it can be confusing in matching professional characteristics with learning objectives.

Expertise, or skill, is given ample coverage in the OPMEP; there is a plethora of direction on what constitutes professional expertise, with references to even more detailed guidance and direction. Standards of behavior are captured in references to ethics education at all levels, but without considering the differences in the task environments per Jacobs and Jacques's arguments. Only references to Bloom's taxonomic categories of knowledge and learning (know, comprehend, apply) change with the levels. Corporate-ness, or regulation, is discussed in the briefest and broadest terms as part of the primary (grades O-1 thru O-3) PME system in Appendix A to the OPMEP. Ethics as a learning area clearly is directed at all levels in the OPMEP and appears to be the only subject area that is consistently matched with the professional characteristic.

**Enhancing the Structure for Professional Military Education**

The existing structure for American PME is paradoxically very detailed and very comprehensive in describing learning objectives, but only in the most general way is it matched with the professional characteristics espoused by the American military. This paradoxical situation limits the ability of external clientele to evaluate or assess how well the structure works to ensure that officers are indeed professional. This article proposes enhancing the existing structure to resolve the paradox; it would retain a generality that allows for innovation and flexibility in education to meet changing environmental circumstances and specific service needs, but it also includes sufficient detail to allow external clients of the military profession to examine and be reassured that certification and regulation of the military professionals is adequate; social trust can thereby be reinforced and increased.

The enhanced structure is based on professional competencies that are scaled to Jacobs and Jacques's functions, not to actual rank or grades; this reflects the reality that in a rapidly evolving and uncertain operating environment, responsibility and accountability, the two core values of every military officer, often render hierarchal grade/rank relationships irrelevant to accomplishing the missions and tasks of a military operation. The improved structure also accounts for environmental conditions, again relying on Jacob and Jacques's observation that the most critical leadership task is understanding, interpreting, and appropriately interacting with the operating environment.

The core of the enhanced structure would replace the desired leader attributes and subjects for instruction in the OPMEP with five professional competency areas,
all of which can be converted to assessable rubrics at each level. The five are lead, think, plan, act competently, and act ethically. These five are found in various guises throughout the military profession and civil-military relations literature; they are what both professional members and their clients in the public sphere expect their military professionals to do.28

Leading can be placed on a continuum from personal, focusing on leader attributes; through organizational, focusing command and staff relationships; to systemic, in which the interaction of command, environment, and staff all play.29 Thinking can be thought of as critical or creative, with both able to be developed within individuals. The operational level of organizational action primarily uses critical or analytic thinking; higher levels require professionals to visualize possibilities and create both problems and solutions.30 Planning, a quintessential military activity, can be defined by scope, ranging from tactical to strategic, and from single service to interagency and multinational. Of the five competency areas, planning is the most comprehensive subject covered in the OPMEP. Acting is the decision and execution component of thinking and planning. The alternative proposes two metrics for action: competence and ethics. Robert Kennedy makes the argument that effective and efficient action by military professionals is insufficient to obtain and retain particularly external social contracts with their public clientele, thus compromising their autonomy of action, without assuring these clients that their actions are good in an ethical sense.31 Following this line of thought, acting competently is separated from acting ethically in the alternative structure. Acting competently can be scaled by level and by environment from problem solving, in which a problem has been found and identified, and associated information (intelligence) provided for assisting in the solution, through problem finding; this associates with Snowden’s complex and chaotic environments, in which organizations and leaders must first understand what it is they are perceiving and experiencing. Russell Ackoff provides guidance on how to distinguish these types of acting (as well as thinking and planning) in Creating the Corporate Future: Plan or Be Planned For.32 Jacobs and Jacques rely on Ackoff’s thinking in their development of leader education requirements for each leadership level. Finally, acting ethically can be placed on a dual spectrum that addresses the source of action (individual-institution) and source of ethic (legal-moral-ethical). This appears consistent with research on this most difficult but also most abused competency.33

When brought together, the aforementioned subjects can be combined into a taxonomic structural matrix for PME (shown in the figure, page 43). In this improved PME structure, within each of the fifteen interior cells, subjects or learning areas from the existing OPMEP can be mapped directly to a characteristic of the military professional. The benefit of the new arrangement is that it makes sense and simplifies the complex logic of the existing OPMEP while retaining the spirit of the original congressional designers of the PME as described in the Report. Finally, the structure
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allows for a cumulative approach to education beginning with bottom levels (complicated environments, operational [tactical] level) and working upward.

The enhanced structure allows for robust testing and certification at each level of leadership; thus, generation and regeneration of the social contract with external clientele and internal members can become unambiguous, discerning, and objective (within bounds). Testing or certification can be conducted using current assessment techniques and systems (e.g., fitness reports, tests) but can also accommodate more stringent assessments should the need arise.

A second observation of the enhanced structure is that it allows the PME system to follow one more recommendation of the congressional Report concerning the quality of instruction: Should it be training, undergraduate, graduate, or something else? The Report recommended a graduate curriculum concentrating more on how to think than what to think. The alternative structure easily could slide into a graduate curriculum. However, this article does not recommend that course of action. Rather, it proposes PME follow a professional education curriculum—a hybrid of learning skills and knowledge. If developed to its fullest extent, the alternative structure would allow for a professional degree, like a Juris Doctor or a Doctor of Medicine degree. This degree would be the culmination of the formative, or lowest, level of the profession. It would be followed by advanced certification as a professional’s career moves forward. All degrees and certificates would be dependent on examination and associated relevant rubrics. By implication, failure to achieve a degree or certification also would be possible; in that case, officers could continue to serve but with caps on their advancement in the profession. As Huntington and Snider both have observed, not all officers who serve are—or can be—professionals.

Third and finally, the proposed enhancement frees the progression in PME from its current basis on grade and years of experience to one that uses job positions...
and operational environment as the determining factors for education need. We argue this is necessary because of the changes in the nature of military operations in the twenty-first century. One major change or characteristic of what is hybrid or gray zone warfare is a nonlinearity of force organization and application that places individuals in the operational environment dependent on technology, not just hierarchal rank. For example, a junior cyberwarrior may find himself or herself in a dynamically developing situation necessitating use of strategic information in a very short time period that negates the ability to consult with higher command; this person needs the knowledge and (hopefully) wisdom of strategic ramifications of tactical action to make reasoned, timely decisions. An agile professional education system can assist in this regard by affording the person the right education and training at the right time.

Summary and Conclusions

The American military aspires to be professional. That should include a robust PME and training program. The existing program structure is temporally linear: the more time (and grade) one spends, the more advanced the education and training opportunities. It also fits the personnel systems’ design, one that represents nineteenth-century management thought. The existing structure assumes that with added rank comes added responsibility and ignores the effects of operating environments; that is, it ignores the very real possibility that a junior- or mid-grade officer in any domain can now easily be placed into a situation with the gravest national consequences. Think of the entire cyber domain; think of drone pilots; think of small teams deployed to places like Syria and Niger.

The improved structure of PME proposed in this article is a solution to the above problems with the existing structure but not the solution. There are many ways than currently exist to create a better education system. All have one thing in common: they will all require more time and more resources devoted to education and training. This must come from a fixed amount of time in any given professional's career; thus, more time in education and training necessarily means less time on deployments. There is no such thing as a free lunch in PME policies. If the American military is serious about retaining its professional status in the increasingly challenging global operating environment of the twenty-first century, then it must decide whether it wants a legacy system and structure that provide a poor fit between its accepted professional characteristics and the environment, or whether it wants an adaptive system of education and training that allows its members to be adequately prepared for the challenges that await them. Both the professionals within the military and its external clientele await its decisions.
Notes


2. Huntington, 8–10.
3. Huntington, 8.
4. Huntington, 11.
17. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1800.01E, Officer Professional Military Education Policy (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 29 May 2015).
18. CJCSI 1800.01E, A-1.
19. CJCSI 1800.01E, A-2; too detailed to include herein; for example, subjects include global force management, theater strategy and campaigning, contract support.
24. CJCSI 1800.01E, Officer Professional Military Education Policy, A-2.
25. CJCSI 1800.01E, A-3.
26. My inspiration for this strategy can be found in the classic treatise by Anthony Downs, Inside Bureaucracy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).
27. CJCSI 1800.01E, Officer Professional Military Education Policy, A-A-3. One can interpret Learning Area 6 in both the Intermediate and Senior Level Learning Areas and Objectives Appendices to include discussion of this topic as well, but this is an implied, not explicit area (see E-C-3 and E-D-3).
29. Such a multifaceted view of leadership can be found in Bernard M. Bass, Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research and Managerial Applications (New York: The Free Press, 2008), especially chap. 2.
30. The author provides a most insightful discussion of this educational challenge in Stephen Brookfield, Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Different Ways of Thinking and Acting (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).